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By

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**DISTRICT-LEVEL SUCCESS:**  
**A CASE STUDY TO DETERMINE**  
**HOW A RECOGNIZED TEXAS SCHOOL DISTRICT MADE PROGRESS IN**  
**CLOSING ACHIEVEMENT GAPS WITH ALL STUDENTS**

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DISTRICT-LEVEL SUCCESS:  
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HOW A RECOGNIZED TEXAS SCHOOL DISTRICT MADE PROGRESS IN  
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by

**Ann Patricia O'Doherty, B.S.; M.A.**

**Treatise**

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**Dedication:**

To my husband Brian,  
thank you, again, and again for traveling along this path, together, with me,  
and to my mother, Louise Michels who has given me life, strength,  
and the courage to persevere.

## Acknowledgements

If I have learned anything through the process of my doctoral research, it has been that no one accomplishes a dissertation alone. While any mistakes or misrepresentations included in this document are clearly my own, any insights presented are the result of a collaborative effort. Through this page, I hope to recognize those people who have supported my learning and writing efforts for the past few years.

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While this report refers to the subject district by the pseudonym of Village ISD, the superintendent, Dr. Annette Griffin, has given permission to reveal that the study was conducted in Carrollton-Farmers Branch ISD. Through the process of this research, I have gained a profound respect for Dr. Griffin, her leadership team, and the respondents of this study. Thank you for your willingness to participate and share your knowledge. Exploring your district has been the most powerful learning experience of my career.

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DISTRICT-LEVEL SUCCESS:  
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Bound by compulsory attendance laws, over 48 million children attend public schools in the United States each year. Unfortunately, for a growing percentage of these students, compulsory attendance has not resulted in equitable achievement. In spite of educational reforms aimed at the school, district, state, and most recently, federal level, academic achievement gaps continue to exist between students of color and students of poverty as compared to white and/or more economically advantaged peers.

Previously identified Educational Frameworks including the Effective Schools Correlates, Malcolm Baldrige Quality Improvement Educational Criteria, Stupski Foundation Components, and Professional Learning Communities Characteristics have described the elements present in successful schools and districts; however research into the process of how districts have made progress toward closing achievement gaps is less prevalent. This grounded theory study examined the processes employed by a single Texas school district serving over 26,000 students in an economically and ethnically diverse community which had made progress in closing achievement gaps with all students.

Data gathered through semi-structured interviews, direct observations, and document reviews informed the findings. The research utilized Strauss and Corbin's three stages of coding: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) for data analysis.

Findings regarding the processes employed revealed that the district: created systems to select, develop and, evaluate leadership personnel; nurtured a district culture of shared accountability for results; crafted systems of accountability; built district structures to support learning and achievement; endorsed district-level decision-making; engineered a research-based and inquiry-driven decision-making culture; intentionally managed change; deployed systems district-wide to impact change at the campus and classroom level, and embraced a commitment to professional learning.

Further analysis of the findings uncovered a primary driver: effective, sustained district leadership and two secondary drivers: nurtured a culture of shared accountability for results and built district structures to support learning and achievement. Together these three drivers caused changes to occur at the campus and classroom level, which in turn contributed to the progress the district made in closing achievement gaps.



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## Chapter 1: Introduction of Study

In 2005, over 48 million children pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade attended public schools in the United States of America (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). Our cultural expectation that all children go to school is supported by state laws requiring mandatory attendance. Unfortunately, for too many of America's students, mandatory attendance has not resulted in mandatory learning or achievement of high standards. Shocking achievement gaps exist between academic results for students of color and students of poverty when compared to their White and/or economically more advantaged peers on both national and state measurements (Wilkins, 2006). It is time to close, and eventually eliminate, these achievement gaps and "ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education" (U. S. Congress, 2001c).

Reducing or eliminating academic achievement gaps has been the focus of education reform (Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000) for over forty years. In spite of legislative actions, special funding programs, and focused efforts on educational improvement and change, the gaps have endured (Cawelti, 2001b). Though the achievement gap data appears to be pervasive, there are schools and districts that have made progress toward closing achievement gaps between all student populations (Cawelti, 2001a; Green & Etheridge, 2001a; Togneri & Anderson, 2003a); however, much of the research on district-level success has

focused on what elements need to be in place, rather than determining how the districts selected and implemented the processes and strategies which led to improvement in closing achievement gaps.

The following briefly reviews previous educational reform efforts and includes evidence that achievement gaps between historically underserved population groups of African American, Hispanic, and Economically Disadvantaged students and White and economically advantaged children continue. A description of the problems this research seeks to address, research questions, and a brief summary of the methodology to be used are outlined. Terms used in the study are defined. Also included in this chapter are the significance of this qualitative study, delimitations, limitations, and assumptions associated with researching how a Texas school district has made progress in closing achievement gaps as evidenced by earning a Recognized Accountability rating.

#### *Brief History of Reform Efforts*

In the 1960's, researchers examining student achievement differences identified economic level of the family as the greatest predictors of school success (Coleman, 1966). This deficit-thinking paradigm did not hold the education system responsible for results, since family wealth, or lack thereof, determined students' academic levels (Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2004). Efforts to eradicate measured gaps in achievement began when other researchers, including George Weber (1971), Lawrence Lezotte (1985), and Ronald Edmonds (1979)

refused to accept assertions that differences in achievement could be attributed to differences in family income levels (Wilkins, 2006).

In the 1970's, educators who rejected this explanation of achievement based on family economics focused research on schools that had demonstrated success with students of poverty and students of color (R. Edmonds, 1979; R. R. Edmonds, 1982; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). Effective Schools research resulted in identification of specific elements associated with schools that achieved success with students of all economic levels and ethnic backgrounds (R. S. Barth, 1990). These elements became known as the Effective Schools Correlates and included the following: strong instructional leadership; clear and focused mission; positive home-school relationships; opportunity to learn and time on task; climate of high expectations for success; safe and orderly environment; and frequent monitoring of school success. Though these researchers had identified successful high poverty schools, the majority of schools serving students from low socio-economic families continued to be considered low performing.

During the 1980's, American schools were not the only organizations determined to be underperforming. American products were deemed inferior to those produced abroad and once vibrant companies began to lose market share (Siri & Miller, 2001). To rectify this situation, American businesses turned to Total Quality Management (TQM) "which swept across corporate America"



(Bolman & Deal, 2003, p. 154). Based in part on the works of W. Edwards Deming, this organizational model “emphasized workforce involvement, participation, and teaming as essential components of serious quality efforts” (p. 154). Businesses employing TQM models for organizational reform began to report gains in market share and profitability. In 1987, the US Congress voted in the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Improvement Act (U. S. Congress, 1987) to create an award that would provide guidance to American businesses seeking to improve the quality of their organizations. Schools and districts began adapting the quality principles outlined in this business organizational model. In spite of a surge in quality principles being applied in education resulting in pockets of excellence (Siegel, 2000), overall, students of color, and students of poverty continued to perform below White and economically more advantaged peers.

Along with continued interest in TQM, education reform efforts during the 1990’s saw the emergence of learning organizations (Senge, 1990) as well as a focus on facilitating organizational change (Fullan, 1993). In 1996, to guide school district improvement efforts, the Stupski Foundation introduced educational criteria similar to the business organization criteria of the Malcolm Baldrige Quality Award program (Stupski Foundation, 2005). Two years later, The Baldrige National Quality Program released its own Education Criteria for Performance Excellence (Siri & Miller, 2001). Also in 1998, Rick DuFour and Robert Eaker published their book, *Professional Learning Communities at Work:*

*Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement.* In this book, the authors presented an educational reform model that distilled principles from Effective Schools Correlates, Total Quality Management, change theory, and combined these with collaborative practices in curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The Professional Learning Communities (PLC) model emphasized changing attitudes and behaviors in order to increase commitment for the relentless pursuit, and acquisition, of student success. Unfortunately, at the dawn of the new century, though isolated schools and districts had made progress, historically underserved students continued to demonstrate lower achievement levels.

#### *Evidence of Achievement Gaps*

In spite of over forty years of research on effective practices of successful educational reform, achievement gaps continue to plague our schools and school districts. Evidence of differences in achievement between White students and students of color, and between students from stronger economic backgrounds with those from poverty exist at both the national and state level.

#### *Achievement Gaps at the National Level*

The United States has not adopted national standards or assessments, but national statistics reveal achievement gaps between population groups in high school graduation rates, educational attainment levels, and achievement on nationally normed assessment instruments such as the Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT). According to the Institute of Education Science, only 87% of African

Americans and 63% of Hispanics earned a high school diploma in 2005. These statistics reveal continuing gaps in high school graduation rates for students of color when compared to 92% of Whites earning a high school diploma in the same year (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2005).

In an economic system that values the ability to process information, think critically, and solve problems (Friedman, 2005; Wheatley, 2006), just completing high school is not enough to prepare people entering the workforce in today's global economy (Moore, 2006). Increased competition for jobs with other countries has focused attention on college completion rates for American students (Miller, 2003). Data reported by the Institute of Education Science (2005) illuminates achievement gaps in higher education. In 2005, only 49% of African Americans and 33% of Hispanics between the ages of 25-29 attended college for any length of time as compared to 64% of Whites. The results for attaining bachelor degrees are even less promising. As compared to 34% of Whites, only 18% of African Americans and 11% of Hispanics between the ages of 25 and 29 continued in college and completed a bachelors degree (Institute of Education Sciences, 2005).

Is the lower percentages of minority students entering college and attaining a degree purely personal choice, or do other factors impact whether or not students choose to attend college, are admitted, and actually complete a course of study? A student's scores on the SAT is one factor used in college admission

decisions. Mean SAT scores reported for 2006 and disaggregated by ethnicity (Table 1) indicate that educational outcomes vary greatly between ethnic groups. Differences exist between mean scores in math for African American (429) and Hispanic (463) students, with scores for both of these population groups lagging far behind those of Whites (536). Variations in results by family income are also noted. Mean scores for both reading and math reported for students with more than \$100,000 of family income (549, 564) are 100 points higher than those of students reporting \$20,000 or less in family income (445, 465).

**Table 1 2006 College Board Mean SAT - National Results**

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>% of Test Takers</b>	<b>Reading</b>	<b>Math</b>	<b>Writing</b>
African-American	10%	434	429	428
Hispanic	10%	457	463	451
White	56%	527	536	519
<b>Family Income</b>				
Less than \$10,000	4%	429	457	427
\$10,000 - \$20,000	7%	445	465	440
\$20,000 - \$30,000	8%	462	474	454
\$30,000 - \$40,000	10%	478	488	470
\$40,000 - \$50,000	8%	493	501	483
\$50,000 - \$60,000	9%	500	509	490
\$60,000 - \$70,000	8%	505	515	496
\$70,000 - \$80,000	9%	511	521	502
\$80,000- \$100,000	13%	523	534	514
More than \$100K	24%	549	564	543

### *Achievement Gaps at the State Level*

Unlike the national level, states are required to set academic standards and conduct annual assessments of academic progress (U. S. Congress, 2001c). The

past three years of Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) results reported for grades 3<sup>rd</sup> through 11<sup>th</sup> grade exit level in Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies (Table 2) are presented by student demographic groups. Bolded numbers indicate less than 70% of the students in the population group achieved at least a passing score on the exam. White students maintained passing rates of at least 70% across all tests for all three years.

**Table 2 2006, 2005 & 2004 TAKS Results: Percentage of Students Meeting at Least Minimum Requirements**

TAKS Results		Percent Meeting Passing Standard Summary of All Grades for 2004, 2005, 2006					
		State	African Amer.	Hispanic	White	Eco. Dis.	LEP
English	2006	87	82	82	94	81	<b>63</b>
	2005	83	76	77	91	76	<b>58</b>
	2004	80	71	72	89	70	<b>51</b>
Math	2006	75	<b>61</b>	<b>68</b>	86	<b>66</b>	<b>58</b>
	2005	71	<b>55</b>	<b>63</b>	83	<b>61</b>	<b>53</b>
	2004	<b>66</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>57</b>	78	<b>55</b>	<b>48</b>
Writing	2006	91	89	89	95	88	77
	2005	90	86	87	94	85	74
	2004	89	84	85	93	84	72
Science	2006	70	<b>54</b>	<b>59</b>	85	<b>58</b>	<b>35</b>
	2005	<b>63</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>50</b>	79	<b>48</b>	<b>26</b>
	2004	<b>56</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>41</b>	73	<b>39</b>	<b>19</b>
Soc St.	2006	87	81	80	94	79	<b>49</b>
	2005	87	81	80	94	79	<b>49</b>
	2004	84	77	76	92	74	<b>44</b>
All Tests	2006	<b>67</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>58</b>	81	<b>56</b>	<b>45</b>
	2005	<b>62</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>52</b>	76	<b>50</b>	<b>39</b>
	2004	<b>57</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>46</b>	71	<b>44</b>	<b>34</b>

Bolded numbers indicate less than 70% passing rate

The three years of data indicate increasing trends for all population groups, with African American, Hispanic, Economically Disadvantaged, and LEP students demonstrating a greater rate of progress as compared to white students in

all subject areas. Despite this increased rate of progress, less than 70% of African American, Hispanic, Economically Disadvantaged, and Limited English Proficient (LEP) students passed mathematics and science.

While other population groups may be making strong gains, the percentages of other student population's passing science and math are still quite low when compared to White student scores as illustrated by comparing science passing rates from 2004 to 2006. The percentage of Economically Disadvantaged students passing science rose by 49% (39% to 58%) as compared with only a 16% increase percent passing science (73% to 85%) for White students. Regardless of this remarkable gain, in order to match the 2006 White performance in science (85%), Economically Disadvantaged students (58%) would need an additional 47% increase in the percentage of students passing science. This pattern is repeated for African American, Hispanic, and LEP student results as well.

Achievement on academic assessments serves as a predictor of high school graduation rates. There are two levels considered in computing high school graduation rates in Texas: Completion I rates include students who have graduated from, or continued in, high school; Completion II rates include graduation, continuance, and successful passage of the Graduation Equivalency Exam (GRE). As displayed in Table 3 (Table 3), both Completion I and Completion II rates continue to demonstrate disparities between different population groups. Completion II rates of Whites (98.0) continue to outpace those

for African American (94.5) and Hispanic (93.1) students. Completion II rates for Economically Disadvantaged students reveal the lowest measured results of all comparison groups at 93.3% (Table 3). Achievement gaps are also evident in high school drop out rates for Texas students as seen in Table 3. Dropout rates for Hispanic (6.9%), Economically Disadvantaged (6.7%), and African American (5.5%) students well-exceed the 2.0% drop out rate reported for White students.

**Table 3 TEA 2004 05 Texas High School Completion Rates by Ethnicity and Economically Disadvantaged**

Group	Graduated	Continued	GED	Dropped		Completion	
				Out	Completion I	II	
African American	81.7	10.2	2.6	5.5	91.9	94.5	
Asian Pacific Islander	92.7	4.3	1.2	1.8	97.0	98.2	
Hispanic	77.4	12.3	3.4	6.9	89.7	93.1	
Native American	84.3	5.6	5.2	4.9	89.9	95.1	
White	89.5	3.9	4.7	2.0	93.3	98.0	
Economically Disadvant	77.4	12.0	3.9	6.7	89.4	93.3	
State Totals	84.0	79.0	3.8	4.3	91.9	95.7	

**Note:** Completion I includes students who graduated or continued high school

Completion II includes students who graduated, continued high school, or received GED's

Texas SAT results for ethnic groups and family income (Table 4) parallel the national results. Nearly 100 points separates the scores of African American and White students in both reading and math. As with the national results, scores increase incrementally by income with differences of at least 100 points between those students whose families earn less than \$20,000 and those whose families earn more than \$100,000 of yearly income

**Table 4 2006 College Board Mean SAT - Texas Results**

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>% of Test Takers</b>	<b>Reading</b>	<b>Math</b>	<b>Writing</b>
African-American	11%	429	432	431
Hispanic	24%	445	460	445
White	49%	524	539	517
<b>Family Income</b>				
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\$10,000 - \$20,000	9%	434	451	434
\$20,000 - \$30,000	10%	449	465	448
\$30,000 - \$40,000	11%	468	481	464
\$40,000 - \$50,000	8%	483	496	478
\$50,000 - \$60,000	8%	495	506	488
\$60,000 - \$70,000	7%	498	512	493
\$70,000 - \$80,000	8%	501	517	496
\$80,000- \$100,000	13%	516	531	509
More than \$100K	21%	540	559	534

*Summary of Evidence on Achievement Gaps*

National statistics on high school completion rates, educational attainment levels and SAT results all indicate continuing achievement gaps between specific population groups. Texas academic assessment results, high school completion rates, and mean scores obtained on college entrance exams also serve as evidence of continuing achievement gaps at the state level. The disparities illustrated by this data emphasize that achievement gaps continue to exist between students of color and Whites, as well as between Economically Disadvantaged and economically more advantaged students. In an effort to eradicate these achievement gaps, Congress passed the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) in 2001. NCLB requires all students demonstrate proficiency in reading, math, and science by 2014 (U. S. Congress, 2001c).



### *Statement of the Problem*

Educational frameworks designed to improve achievement for all students have been developed and deployed since the 1970's. These include Effective Schools Correlates (R. Edmonds, 1979), the Baldrige Quality Improvement Criteria (Baldrige National Quality Program, 2006), the Stupski Foundation Components (Stupski Foundation, 2005), and Professional Learning Communities Characteristics (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005).

A review of current educational frameworks has revealed that though there are differences among these educational models, several themes appear to be held in common. These shared elements include the following: the importance of strong leadership to motivate and facilitate the work; clear mission and vision widely shared and supported by strategic planning at all levels of the organization and coordinated to achieve specific measurable goals; collaboration with key stakeholders including parents, community members, and staff; a focus on curriculum, instruction, and assessment aligned to high standards; a collaborative climate that focuses on people as resources through effective, ongoing, job-embedded professional development and teaming methods; examination of processes to determine effectiveness of systems; accountability through shared decision-making as well as shared responsibility for results; the courage to embark on reform as well as the intestinal fortitude to carry it out.

As we approach the midway point of the NCLB authorization timeline of 2014, there continue to be many individual school success stories, particularly at the elementary level; however, school districts that have produced system-wide success at closing or eliminating achievement gaps are less common (Fullan, Bertani, & Quinn, 2004). Individual schools may only impact the education of the students enrolled at their campus site. School districts typically encompass larger concentrations of students than individual schools do. To increase the scale of reform, and impact the greatest number of students, district-level achievement must be secured (Duffy, 2003).

In recognition that systems must change in order to sustain long-term innovation (Fullan, Bertani, & Quinn, 2004), researchers have begun to focus on successful district-level reform efforts which impact multiple organizational components simultaneously (Cuban & Usdan, 2002; Duffy, 2003). Research on district-level reform has also identified key elements found in districts that have made progress toward closing achievement gaps (Cawelti, 2001a; Green & Etheridge, 2001a; Kim & Crasco, 2006; Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000; Snipes & Casserly, 2004; Stupski Foundation, 2005; Togneri & Anderson, 2003a).

The educational frameworks originally identified in the 1970's, 80's and 90's bear striking resemblance to the findings of the most recent research conducted. This supports the belief that district leaders have had access to

research about what elements should be in place to close achievement gaps. The problem, however, has not been a lack of research of *what* is needed to support high levels of learning for all students, but rather that there is less research available to direct district leaders on *how* to implement these practices and systems (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Fullan, Bertani, & Quinn, 2004) especially at the district-level. Thus, it is imperative to focus on the process used by successful school districts to achieve positive educational change for all students (Cuban & Usdan, 2002). It is essential that the processes used by these successful districts be uncovered and the results disseminated so that district-level educational leaders learn from one another. When educational opportunities can be improved for more school children, this helps to ensure their future, as well as the future of our country. “Closing the gap is widely seen as important not just for our education system but ultimately for our economy, our social stability, and our moral health as a nation” (Evans, 2005, p. 582).

#### *Purpose of Study*

Perhaps the most important finding revealed by an analysis of previous research is that each study reviewed came to the same conclusion: with the proper motivation, collective will, and tenacity, large districts serving ethnically diverse populations from low income homes can close achievement gaps and increase academic success for all students. As stated elsewhere, previous research has identified common elements of successful school and district reform; however, an

important piece is missing from the body of research on districts that have made progress in closing achievement gaps. Though the elements present in successful districts have been described, the process that districts have used to put these elements in place is not well documented. In order to make progress and change, it is essential to know both what to do to achieve success as well as how to select and implement elements to sustain this success (Collins, 2001; Fullan, 2001a, 2001b; McEwan & McEwan, 2003). In educational reform, it is critical to discover how a school district succeeds in developing the elements needed to make progress toward closing achievement gaps (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Fullan, 2001a). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to determine how a school district made progress in closing achievement gaps with all students.

### *Research Questions*

Effective Schools Research, and other models of school and district improvement, have been available for decades (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; R. Edmonds, 1979; Lezotte & Bancroft, 1985; Murphy & Hallinger, 1988; Winn & Cameron, 1998). Since the research on key elements which need to be in place has been readily available and widely disseminated, why aren't more districts demonstrating an ability to close the achievement gaps between student populations? Why have some districts made progress, while other districts, serving similar student populations, have yet to produce academic gains for all students?

The research questions for this study include:

1. How did a school district in Texas make progress toward closing achievement gaps across all population groups as measured by the State Accountability System?
2. How did the district select which processes and/or strategies to employ in order to make progress toward closing student achievement gaps across all population groups?
3. How did the district implement the identified processes and/or strategies to make progress toward closing student achievement gaps across all population groups?

### *Methodology*

This single case, qualitative study, utilized a grounded theory approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994) of a purposefully selected Texas school district. As expected with grounded theory, a single, specific educational framework was not selected to interpret the findings (Morse & Richards, 2002). Grounded theory “seeks to ensure that the theory emerging arises from the data and not from some other source” (Crotty, 1998, p. 78).

The selected school district met the research criteria of serving at least 10,000 students in an economically and ethnically diverse community and had received a Recognized rating by the State of Texas. District personnel agreed to

participate in a qualitative research study to determine how a Recognized Texas school district made progress in closing achievement gaps with all students.

Qualitative data was gathered by a single researcher. The primary data source consisted of semi-structured interviews with purposively selected district members including: the superintendent, assistant superintendents, members of the board of trustees, central office personnel, and representative principals. Other data sources included direct observation and document examination. Analysis methods followed the three coding phases outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998): open, axial, and selective coding. Triangulation of results from all three data sources informed the findings and final conclusions (Mertens, 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Morse & Richards, 2002; Patton, 2002). More detailed descriptions of the methodology, measures, design, and procedures, have been included in Chapter Three.

### *Definition of Terms*

The following are operational definitions of terms used in this research study:

*Achievement Gap:* The difference between measured outcomes when the results of two population groups are compared. Historically in the United States, gaps exist between ethnically and economically determined population groups when measured achievement data are compared. This study focuses on the

population groups included in the Texas Accountability System: African American, Hispanic, White, and Economically Disadvantaged.

*Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS):* Information compiled by the State of Texas on performance measures of students which includes graduation rates, attendance, academic achievement results, participation rates in advanced programs, and college entrance exam participation and performance. Results for each school and school district, disaggregated by population groups, are reported annually.

*Accountability Ratings:* In Texas, each school and school district receives one of four rating designations as defined by the Texas Education Agency and reported in the AEIS Annual Report. Exemplary, Recognized, Acceptable and Academically Unacceptable ratings are determined by the percentages of all students, and each student population group, meeting set standards on the following pre-defined factors: Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS); State-Developed Alternative Assessment (SDAA II); Completion Rate I; and the Annual Dropout Rate for grades 7 and 8. See Appendix A for the complete 2006 criteria in use for each accountability rating.

*Closing Achievement Gaps:* measured decreases over time in the differences between academic results for student population groups. For the purpose of this study the groups included have been limited to those identified for

Accountability ratings by the State of Texas: African American, Hispanic, White, and Economically Disadvantaged.

*Elements:* According to *The American Heritage Dictionary of The English Language*, an element is “a fundamental, essential, or irreducible constituent of a composite entity” (Morris, 1981, p. 422). For the purpose of this research, the term elements refers to the collective correlates, criteria, components, characteristics, processes, and strategies described as essential for school reform.

*Ethnicity for School Purposes:* in Texas, self-selected designation determined by parents during enrollment of African American, Hispanic, Asian, Other, and White.

*Economically Disadvantaged Students:* students whose families have completed an application for the federal meal assistance program and are determined to be eligible for free and/or reduced school meals. Families must apply annually by completing a form available in either English or Spanish that includes a statement of financial means. Note: It should not be assumed that all students whose families would qualify for assistance have applied for, and are receiving, this assistance.

*Low Income Students:* see definition for Economically Disadvantaged students.

*Processes:* The systems and actions employed to accomplish results in a school district.



*Progress:* measured gains in results on standardized instruments

*Recognized Accountability Rating:* Texas State Accountability System sets required standards for each population group and all students. The 2006 criteria for Recognized rating required TAKS and SDAA II passing rates of 70% for each subject OR meets 65% floor and required improvement; Completion Rate I of 85% standard or 80% standard plus required improvement; Dropout Rate of .7% standard or .9% and required improvement. See Appendix A for requirements for each rating category.

*Strategy:* In this research, strategy refers to planning, and carrying out plans designed to achieve a specific goal.

*Success:* measured progress in closing or eliminating differences in measured achievement for students of all populations groups when compared to White, and economically advantaged results. Results must indicate achievement of all groups at, or approaching, a high standard. In other words, success in closing achievement gaps does not mean that all groups are performing at equally low levels.

*Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS):* Annual academic assessments at specified grade levels used to measure student achievement in the areas of reading (3<sup>rd</sup>-9<sup>th</sup>), language arts (10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>), math (3<sup>rd</sup>-11<sup>th</sup>), writing (4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>), science (5<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>), and social studies (8<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>) (Texas Education Agency, 2006a).

*Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS):* Curriculum framework adopted by the state of Texas that establishes core foundation learning expectations in each subject area divided by grade levels and/or courses.

*Texas High Schools Recommended Graduation Plan:* Students entering high school for 2001-02, or later, are expected to complete minimum requirements which include, in part, specific credits and courses in the areas of: English (4), math (3), science (3), social studies (3.5), and languages other than English (2) (for full lists of requirements, see Texas Education Agency website [www.tea.state.tx.us](http://www.tea.state.tx.us)).

### *Significance of the Study*

Prior research has identified key elements present in American school districts that have made progress in closing achievement gaps between population sub groups (Cawelti, 2001a; Green & Etheridge, 2001a; Kim & Crasco, 2006; Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000; Snipes & Casserly, 2004; Stupski Foundation, 2005; Togneri & Anderson, 2003a) to some extent. For instance, researchers have outlined elements that need to be in place in order to achieve success with students from all population groups, but did not necessarily detail how the studied districts selected and implemented these specific elements. This study will expand the knowledge of the process used by a single school district to make progress in closing achievement gaps with all students. The results of this study may inform

the practice of other district leaders who are attempting to make progress in closing achievement gaps.

### *Delimitations*

This study focuses on a single school district designated with at least a Recognized rating by the state of Texas Accountability System. The intent of this study is to provide insight into the processes and strategies used by one district to meet local conditions. It is not the intent of this study to outline a regimented formula for success that can be replicated in other settings. Though an attempt has been made to select a district that is representative of the average demographics for the state, due to the nature of single case studies, the results cannot be generalized to other settings.

Since this study concerns district-level efforts, the persons selected for interviews will be those whose position provides them with a district-level perspective. Selected individuals will ideally include the superintendent, school board members, and central office personnel serving at the cabinet level. In addition to these central office and district-level people, a limited number of representative principals will also be interviewed. Therefore, the selected respondents will primarily represent central office staff rather than a broad sampling of district wide personnel.

### *Limitations*

The limitations of the qualitative methodology of this single case study include the following: the inability to generalize findings, a lack of comparison information from other districts, the relatively small number of purposefully selected respondents, and the potential for bias when a single researcher both gathers and interprets the data (McEwan & McEwan, 2003). The design of the study will attempt to compensate for the limitations noted above.

### *Assumptions*

There are two layers of assumptions present in this study. The first layer concerns research design and reliance on the Texas Accountability rating system and Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) to identify districts that have made progress in closing achievement gaps. The second assumption rests in the validity of the TAKS to accurately measure the achievement of non-White and Economically Disadvantaged students.

The design of the research relies on the Texas Education Agency rating system as an indicator of closing or eliminating the achievement gap. This rating system identifies those schools and districts that are making achievement gains with all student groups. Though these rating are by no means a perfect measure of equalized outcomes of education, the Recognized rating is a starting point to identify those districts that have demonstrated progress in closing achievement gaps. Texas school districts receiving a Recognized designation have achieved

measured academic results of at least 65% of all students and all student groups meeting expectations on state assessment criteria. This may not seem like a high enough standard; however, only 14 of the 89 Texas school districts with enrollments greater than 10,000 students have achieved a Recognized rating (Texas Education Agency, 2006c). This means 83% of the larger Texas districts have yet to achieve even the 65% standard. It is hoped that by describing the processes employed by a Recognized district, leaders of other school districts may gain insight into possible pathways in closing achievement gaps.

A second assumption made by this researcher is that the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) accurately measures the achievement of all students. Although some researchers argue that standardized achievement tests include bias and therefore do not accurately reflect the knowledge and skills of Non-White students and those in poverty (Bracey, 2005; English, 2002), this author believes that as long as White and economically secure students can be prepared to do well on an achievement measure, that children of color and children of poverty can be prepared to do at least equally well on that same achievement measure. This is especially critical when historically underserved students are educated in the same classrooms, schools, or districts as White and economically advantaged peers (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1997; Tatum, 2004).

### *Chapter Summary*

Schools and districts continue to struggle with closing or eliminating achievement gaps that exist between students of color and White students, as well as between students eligible for free and reduced lunch and those with greater family income (see Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4). Both historical research findings and recent studies have identified key elements present in schools and districts that have made progress in closing achievement gaps. This study proposes researching a single Texas school district that has earned a Recognized Accountability rating. It is hoped this research will determine how a Recognized Texas school district made progress in closing achievement gaps with all students.

The criteria to select the district for study, as well as the methodology for this qualitative research project based on a grounded theory approach have been summarized. Though this research concerns a single district in a single state as viewed through the eyes of a single researcher, the results of this study could be far-reaching, if other districts can learn from the processes employed by a district that has made measured progress in closing achievement gaps.

### *Organization of the Study*

This research is organized into five chapters, with additional appendixes and bibliography.

Chapter 1 defines the statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions addressed, briefly summarizes the methodology used, and explains the significance of the study. It further establishes delimitations, and acknowledges limitations for a case study conducted on a single Texas district. The research design to discover the processes employed by a purposefully selected Texas school district to make progress in closing achievement gaps is briefly summarized.

Chapter 2 provides a literature review of the historical context on closing or eliminating achievement gaps. Several key educational frameworks are summarized: Effective Schools Model, the Baldrige Quality Improvement Model, and Professional Learning Communities Model. These key educational frameworks serve as lenses to analyze findings from recent research conducted on districts which have made progress in closing achievement gaps. The results of this literature review underscore the need to conduct process studies on school districts that have shown progress in closing achievement gaps.

Chapter 3 outlines the qualitative methodology used to design and conduct the research and explains the method for selecting a single district that has made progress in closing achievement gaps as measured by state accountability criteria.

This chapter further explains the process used for gathering data and initial evaluation of results.

Chapter 4 describes the context of the district studied and provides information on the changes in demographic and achievement data over the past several years.

Chapter 5 presents the results of the findings with supporting data extracted from interviews, direct observation, and document analysis.

Chapter 6 provides a discussion of the results of this study in relation to prior research, presents a model to represent the finding from Village ISD, discusses implications of the practice and proposes areas for further research.



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

“Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments....it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education,” (“Brown v. Board of Education”, 1954, p. 4). With these words, The United States Supreme Court delivered its ruling to strike down legal school segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education*. While America has made progress in the past fifty years to improve educational opportunity, our nation’s schools still do not provide equal educational outcomes for all of our students. Pervasive gaps are evident at both the national and state level in spite of educational reform efforts to eradicate differences between population groups (Johnson, 2002).

Attempts to close, and eventually eliminate, these achievement gaps through educational reform have filled the research literature. Education reform efforts have historically focused on individual school success (Duffy, 2003). Though individual schools have shown progress in overcoming achievement gaps, and sustaining improvements over time, education proponents have begun to demand that school-by-school reform give way to focused district-level efforts. Skrla et al (2000) have urged:

In order to meet democratic responsibilities to the children of color and children from low income homes who persistently have been and continue to be under-served by U. S. schools, broader academic success for all children is essential. What is needed are entire school districts, and ideally, regions and states in which all schools, not just isolated campuses, are

places in which children of color and children from low SES homes experience the same kind of school success that most white children and children from middle- and upper-class homes have always enjoyed. (p. 1)

In the past several years, more research has begun to focus on district-level success that has resulted in reduction in academic achievement gaps (Fullan, Bertani, & Quinn, 2004).

The chapter is organized to fulfill the purposes outlined by Mertens (2005): provide a context for the research described in this report; analyze current studies to evaluate effectiveness of the research as well as applicability of findings; and to identify areas not well represented by the current body of literature as possible avenues for further research. Included in this chapter is a discussion of the current federal and state legislative environment requiring educational reform, reviews of four key educational frameworks that have been adopted by schools and/or districts in the course of educational reform, a literature review of recent research studies of district-level progress in closing achievement gaps and three possible directions for further research.

#### *Legal Pressure for Improvements*

While the case to close and eventually eliminate achievement gaps has been made by researchers and educational leaders for decades, legislative actions at both the federal and state level have recently mandated academic excellence for all. This section reviews two legal contexts for reform impacting this study, the

federal *No Child Left Behind Act* and the State of Texas Accountability System.

The *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB), enacted into law January 2002, (U. S. Congress, 2001c) has created sweeping changes in educational policies throughout our nation (Hill, 2002). The stated purpose of NCLB is “to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (U. S. Congress, 2001c, p. 15).

NCLB sets out the requirements of an effective education system which includes:

- (1) ensuring that high-quality academic assessments, accountability systems, teacher preparation and training, curriculum, and instructional materials are aligned with challenging State academic standards so that students, teachers, parents, and administrators can measure progress against common expectations for student academic achievement;
- (2) meeting the educational needs of low-achieving children in our Nation’s highest-poverty schools, limited English proficient children, migratory children, children with disabilities, Indian children, neglected or delinquent children, and young children in need of reading assistance;
- (3) closing the achievement gap between high- and low performing children, especially the achievement gaps between minority and non-minority students, and between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers;
- (4) holding schools, local educational agencies, and States accountable for improving the academic achievement of all students, and identifying and turning around low-performing schools that have failed to provide a high-quality education to their students, while providing alternatives to students in such schools to enable the students to receive a high-quality education;
- (5) distributing and targeting resources sufficiently to make a difference to local educational agencies and schools where needs are greatest;

- (6) improving and strengthening accountability, teaching, and learning by using State assessment systems designed to ensure that students are meeting challenging State academic achievement and content standards and increasing achievement overall, but especially for the disadvantaged;
- (7) providing greater decision making authority and flexibility to schools and teachers in exchange for greater responsibility for student performance;
- (8) providing children an enriched and accelerated educational program, including the use of school-wide programs or additional services that increase the amount and quality of instructional time;
- (9) promoting school-wide reform and ensuring the access of children to effective, scientifically based instructional strategies and challenging academic content;
- (10) significantly elevating the quality of instruction by providing staff in participating schools with substantial opportunities for professional development;
- (11) coordinating services under all parts of this title with each other, with other educational services, and, to the extent feasible, with other agencies providing services to youth, children, and families; and
- (12) affording parents substantial and meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children. (U. S. Congress, 2001c, pp. 15-16)

NCLB requires each state to develop its own accountability system. The law further delineates mandatory economic and/or intervention strategies for States and local education agencies (LEA) that fail to conform to federal requirements and/or fail to achieve Adequate Yearly Progress. Many states have had to create accountability, standards, and assessment systems in response to NCLB (Sunderman & Kim, 2004).

Texas' history with state mandated accountability gave it an advantage in meeting the requirements of NCLB. Beginning in 1984, with the passage of HB 72, the state of Texas has utilized state adopted standardized assessments to

measure student, school, and district achievement levels. In order to increase academic rigor, this original system has undergone several modifications. The Texas Legislature, in 1993, passed laws requiring a new state accountability system that would provide district and campus ratings based on state developed academic assessment results and other factors of school success (Texas Education Agency, 2006b). The Texas Education Agency (TEA) oversees this system and one year after the enactment of NCLB, TEA introduced the current assessment, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS).

The 2003 Texas Accountability System which went into effect in 2004 supports the more stringent requirements outlined by NCLB. Each academic rating defined by TEA includes minimum required levels of achievement for all students and each student population group. Population groups identified in Texas for accountability purposes include: African American, Hispanic, White; and Economically Disadvantaged. Four base indicators are used to determine the 2006 ratings: performance on the TAKS, SDAA II, completion I Rates, and Annual Dropout Rate. The 2006 TEA Accountability rating requirements for TAKS are:

Exemplary: meets or exceeds 90% standard for each subject;

Recognized: meets 70% standard for each subject OR meets 65% floor and required improvement);

Academically Acceptable: Reading/ELA: 60%; Writing: 60%; Social Studies: 60%; Mathematics: 40%; Science: 35%; OR meets Required Improvement;

Academically Unacceptable: does not meet minimum requirements for academically acceptable (Texas Education Agency, 2006a)

See Appendix A for a listing of requirements for each indicator and rating category.

Districts are required by Texas law to annually report to their school board and general public results of state and national assessments, accreditation ratings and performance ratings for the district and each school contained within the district. Schools and districts identified as unacceptable face sanctions including required interventions, voluntary transfers to other schools/districts at district expense, and even state takeover of operations (Texas Education Agency, 2006a).

Though both federal and state of Texas law requires academic gains for all children, neither level of regulations specifies a particular model of education reform. This next section reviews four key educational frameworks, each of which has previously been utilized in improvement efforts by either individual schools and/or school districts.

#### *Key Educational Frameworks of Successful Schools and Districts*

Unequal educational opportunities and lower achievement results for children of color and children in poverty are not recent phenomena. In 1954, Chief Justice Warren struck down the ‘separate but equal’ standard of education and advised the nation that equal means equal without regard to racial distinctions ("Brown v. Board of Education"). Unfortunately, as evidenced by the ongoing

achievement gaps, repealing segregation laws has not provided equitable educational opportunities and ensured high-levels of achievement for all children.

The 1964 Civil Rights Act requested research into the factors impacting disparities between achievement levels of students from different ethnic and economic backgrounds (Coleman, 1966, p. abstract). The U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare commissioned research by James Coleman and others that was published in 1966 as *The Equality of Educational Opportunity Study*. This study, more commonly known as *The Coleman Report* (1966), researched why education appeared to be failing ethnic minority and Economically Disadvantaged children. “The results of the study indicated that differences in students’ achievement were associated with family socioeconomic status rather than school-based resource variables (Heck, 2004, p. 132). *The Coleman Report* asserted that academic outcomes of a school could be predicted by the economic level of the students enrolled. This seemed to confirm prevailing wisdom that schools were powerless to effect academic achievement for the urban poor (R. Edmonds, 1979).

In the fifty years since the publication of *The Coleman Report*, countless researchers have studied schools that have achieved academic success in spite of the socio-economic factors impacting students. Four educational frameworks, either developed for schools, school districts, or adapted to education are briefly outlined: The Effective Schools Correlates, Malcolm Baldrige Quality

Improvement Criteria, Stupski Foundation Components, and Professional Learning Communities Characteristics.

*Effective Schools Correlates*

In the 1970's, researchers set out to identify campuses serving students of poverty that had demonstrated high levels of academic achievement (R. Edmonds, 1979). In repudiation of *The Coleman Report* findings, researchers including Edmonds, Lezotte, Brookover, and Weber proved that schools could make a difference, regardless of the socio-economic status of the students in attendance (R. Edmonds, 1979). Studies of these schools revealed common elements which became known as the Effective Schools Correlates: instructional leadership; clear and focused mission; positive home-school relationships; opportunity to learn and time on task; climate of high expectations for success; safe and orderly environment; and frequent monitoring of student progress (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005, p. 179). The Effective Schools Correlates can be found aligned with the key elements of other educational models (Table 5).



**Table 5 Alignment Between Educational Frameworks**

<b>Effective Schools Correlates, 1979</b>	<b>Baldrige Quality Improvement Criteria, 1987</b>	<b>Stupski Foundation Components, 1996</b>	<b>Professional Learning Communities Characteristics, 1998</b>
Instructional leadership	Leadership	Leadership	Shared Leadership
Clear and Focused Mission	Strategic Planning	Strategic Planning and Results	Shared mission, vision, and commitments, SMART Goals
Positive Home-School Relationships	Student, Stakeholder and Market Focus	Stakeholder Engagement	Culture of Collaboration
Opportunity to Learn and Time on Task	Knowledge Management	Curriculum and Teaching	Collective inquiry, Action Orientation & Experimentation
Climate of High Expectations for Success			Relentless Pursuit of Individual Student Success
	Faculty and Staff Focus	Stellar People	Collaborative Teams,
Safe and Orderly Environment	Process Management	Effective and Efficient Processes	Commitment to Continuous Improvement
Frequent Monitoring of Student Progress	Measurement Analysis Organizational Performance Results	Accountability	Focus on Results

The Effective Schools Movement picked up momentum throughout the 1980's. Though many schools were identified for achieving success, the Effective Schools Movement did not result in widespread success at closing the achievement gaps historically found with low socio-economic students. One of its researchers, Lezotte, explains why he believes the Effective Schools Movement did not create widespread reform. "The research identified the components of effective schools, it did not clearly identify how these schools had become effective" (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005, p. 179). By starting with schools that had already demonstrated success, the Effective Schools research had failed to reveal the process these schools had adopted in order to become successful.

Lezotte explains in his chapter in *On Common Ground* (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005), that further efforts to discover the process of improvement through Effective Schools research have centered on the lenses of people, organization, and process. He believes required correlates of successful reform include "strong and continuing support from leaders and the expertise and time needed for the planning and execution of change strategies" (p. 181). Collaboration between stakeholders and commitment to a common purpose appear to be essential ingredients for success. Though the Effective Schools Movement has not resulted in elimination of achievement gaps, the seven correlates identified in the 1970's and 1980's continue to resonate in the research literature. Overlaps are present between the Effective Schools Correlates with

other models for school improvement including a model originally designed for business excellence, the Malcolm Baldrige Quality Improvement Model.

*Malcolm Baldrige Quality Improvement Criteria*

In response to concerns that American businesses were losing the competitive edge and domination of world economic markets, President Ronald Reagan signed into law the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Improvement Act (U. S. Congress, 1987). This act created the Malcolm Baldrige Quality Award (MBQA) Program for American businesses based on the development and deployment of quality practices and organizational performance excellence.

Originally, the criteria provided for consideration for the MBQA was only from a business organization perspective. Recognizing the correlation between organizational quality and the need to restructure schools for academic success, the original business criteria were eventually adapted to the unique needs and characteristics of schools and districts. The educational criteria reflect the following Core Values and Concepts:

visionary leadership; learning-centered education; organizational and personal learning; valuing faculty, staff, and partners; agility; focus on the future; managing for innovation; management by fact; social responsibility; focus on results and creating value; [and] systems perspective. (Baldrige National Quality Program, 2006, p. 1)

The education criterion for this organizational design model includes:

leadership;

strategic planning;

student, stakeholder and market focus;  
measurement analysis and knowledge management;  
faculty and staff focus;  
process management; and  
organizational performance results.

As can be seen from this list of the MBQA education criteria, and further illustrated in the previous table, several areas of congruence exist between MBQA and the Effective Schools Correlates. Training materials for MBQA for education organizations stress the need to integrate systems. MBQA recommends frequent, close inspection of environmental factors including stakeholder satisfaction. Both overall organizational outcomes and results should be scrutinized along with ongoing evaluation of both the systems and processes designed to achieve results (Baldrige National Quality Program, 2005).

The MBQA has been based in part on the principles of Total Quality Management (TQM), often attributed to the work of Edward W. Deming. Schools and school districts have applied the principles of the MBQA and/or TQM to improve their schools (Siri & Miller, 2001). Though research on the results of schools and districts utilizing TQM and MBQA are mixed (Banister, 2001), several reports support the value of the educational criteria to focus school and district efforts in improving process and academic results (J. Barth et al., 2000; Siegel, 2000; Siri & Miller, 2001; Walpole & Noeth, 2002).

### *Stupski Foundation Components*

Unlike the Effective Schools Correlates, or the MBQA, the Stupski Foundation District Improvement Model has been designed specifically to guide school districts in achieving educational reform and closing academic achievement gaps (Stupski Foundation, 2005). The Stupski Foundation (2004) asserts that:

there is no one path to successful school district reform; it is complex and difficult; however, districts can attain increased student achievement by applying research-based best practices in a strategic way, mindful of the needs of the district and its community. (p. 2)

The Stupski Foundation focuses on developing linkages between seven components of systemic reform which are:

- strong, visionary results-oriented leadership;
- strategic planning and results through alignment of action, resources and results;
- standards based curriculum and powerful teaching;
- active engagement of internal and external stakeholders;
- stellar teachers, board members, and support staff who are continuously learning and growing;
- effective and efficient processes; and
- employee and student accountability for results.

There is considerable overlap between the Stupski Foundation Components and the Malcolm Baldrige Quality Improvement Criteria as well as the Effective

Schools Correlates. The Stupski Foundation has been using its model since 1996 and has already assisted six large to medium urban districts in systemic reform. The Stupski Foundation credits the work of Douglas Reeves for the accountability system it employs. Part of the Stupski Foundation process is to identify districts to assist, and send teams of researchers to these selected districts to determine initial readiness for reform. Once a district has been invited to join the Stupski Foundation, additional team visits serve to analyze systems and make recommendations for improvement.

Districts using the Stupski Foundation Components as a framework for improvement report positive results (Dillon, 2005; Rudy & Conrad, 2004; Simpson & Schnitzer, 2005); however, school districts may not apply for this assistance. The Stupski Foundation works on an invitation-only basis and selects which districts it will support. This selective philosophy has limited the number of districts utilizing this approach. The next model explored, Professional Learning Communities (PLC) relies on current staff to enact change, rather than outside evaluators. PLC has gained widespread use among both schools and districts (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005).

#### *Professional Learning Communities Characteristics*

In his landmark book, *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge (1990) offers the following definition of a learning organization, “where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive

patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together” (p. 3). This definition has served as one of the catalysts for the Professional Learning Communities Model (PLC) developed for schools and districts. PLC represents a compilation of ideas synthesized from the works of Deal, Drucker, Darling-Hammond, Fullan, Sarason, Senge and many others (DuFour & Eaker, 1998) and as such includes researched best practice from education as well as private industry.

Characteristics of a PLC include:

- shared mission, vision, and values;
- collective inquiry;
- collaborative teams;
- continuous improvement; and
- results oriented.

PLC characteristics also align to the Effective Schools Correlates, Malcolm Baldrige Quality Improvement Criteria, and Stupski Foundation Components. Clearly, the developers of each of these frameworks share a similar understanding and belief of what will work in schools and districts.

Since the 1990’s, schools across the nation have adopted the PLC approach to school organization (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005). This model emphasizes the relationships among and between PLC characteristics such as results impacting revision of methods, capitalizing on both individual and group

strengths through collective action, and utilizing those within and outside the system for collaboration. Using a series of questions and continuums schools and districts can self-assess the level of progress, diagnose what is needed next, and begin the collective process of improvement. The use of SMART Goals: specific, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, and time-bound (Eaker, DuFour, & Burnette, 2002) direct PLC's to develop strategic plans in concert with stakeholders. PLC's keep in touch with environmental factors in their pursuit of data from within and outside of the organization and use this data to inform decisions.

#### *Summary of Educational Frameworks*

Effective Schools Correlates, Malcolm Baldrige Quality Improvement Criteria, Stupski Foundation Components, and Professional Learning Community Characteristics, each of the educational frameworks discussed here have aspects in common as illustrated in the alignment of key elements included earlier. Due to the variability in descriptive terminology linked to each framework: correlates, criteria, components, and characteristics, the term elements has been chosen to describe essential features, processes, or strategies associated with school reform research and models.

An examination of the elements of these four educational frameworks reveals several recurrent themes:

the importance of strong leadership to motivate and facilitate the work;



clear mission and vision widely shared and supported by strategic planning at all levels of the organization and coordinated to achieve specific measurable goals;

collaboration with key stakeholders including parents, community members, and staff;

a focus on curriculum, instruction, and assessment aligned to high standards;

a collaborative climate that focuses on people as resources through effective, ongoing, job-embedded professional development and teaming methods;

examination of processes to determine effectiveness of systems; and accountability through shared decision-making as well as shared responsibility for results.

As addressed in the previous section of this chapter, educational systems which fail to close or eliminate academic achievement gaps face economic sanctions outlined by both federal and state of Texas legislative actions. These laws do not; however, specify the specific system or school reform model. District and school leaders have the latitude to select a model or process that best meets local needs and conditions. The following section reviews recently conducted research on district-level success in closing achievement gaps. Findings from this research are then analyzed in light of the elements previously identified by Effective Schools Correlates, Malcolm Baldrige Quality Criteria, Stupski Foundation Components and Professional Learning Community Characteristics.

*Research on District-Level Success in Closing Achievement Gaps*

Previous research on efforts to close or eliminate the academic achievement gap have often focused on isolated elements such as improving teacher quality (U. S. Department of Education, 2004), principal leadership (Cotton, 2003), central office personnel (Mac Iver & Farley, 2003) or educational policy (Schwartz, 2001). In recognition that systems must change in order to sustain long-term innovation, researchers have begun to focus on successful district-level reform efforts which impact multiple organizational segments simultaneously (Cawelti, 2001b; Cuban & Usdan, 2002; Green & Etheridge, 2001a; Kim & Crasco, 2006; Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000; Snipes & Casserly, 2004; Togneri & Anderson, 2003a). An analysis of findings from these studies on district-level efforts to close or eliminate the achievement gap follows.

In their study, “Equity-Driven Achievement-Focused School Districts” Skrla, Scheurich, and Johnson (2000) sought to discover why some Texas school districts were experiencing high levels of success with all students. Skrla et al. identified four Texas school districts that had achieved academic success across all population groups, Aldine, Brazosport, San Benito, and Wichita Falls. The districts selected for study met the researchers’ criteria of enrollment of at least 5000 ethnically and economically diverse students, with more than one third of the district’s high poverty schools, and at least two secondary campuses, identified as Recognized or Exemplary. After analyzing achievement results on

the state Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), SAT/ACT and Advanced Placement (AP) tests, four finalist districts received two site-visits from teams of researchers.

Through interviews with key stakeholders including district-level and campus staff, parents, community members and school trustees, shadowing, classroom observations, and examination of district documents, the researchers accumulated data on each of the four districts. Data collected during site visits were analyzed over a six month period and organized into five major themes: state context of accountability on achievement and equity; local equity catalysts, ethical response of district leadership, district transformation, and everyday equity.

Each of the themes identified ‘equity for all students’ as the core of effective educational change. Researchers concluded the districts studied had made the shift from an input-driven: what have students been taught, to an output-driven: what have students learned, context.

While all districts in the state of Texas had the same “state context of accountability” that included high performance expectations for all students and all student groups, not all Texas districts closed achievement gaps. Skrla et al. concluded the need for systemic change had to come from a local context. The studied districts experienced different local catalysts, but each district could

identify specific incidents that forced district members to confront inequities and focus efforts on improvement.

Finally, a core belief in equity had to prevail throughout the organization. This focus on equity led to changed beliefs, behaviors, and practices at all levels of the district. New roles emerged for superintendents and principals; central office staff began supporting principals and teachers; and board members focused their efforts to “set goals and establish policies to promote equitable and excellent learning” (p. 34) rather than attempting to dictate day-to-day operations of the district.

The thoroughness of this study and the length of time research teams spent in the districts gathering and analyzing data serve as its greatest strengths. A limitation is that the researchers did not examine any districts that had not made achievement gains to determine which elements were, or were not, in place in comparison districts. Another possible limitation concerns inter-rater reliability as separate teams interfaced with the various districts. The researchers compensated for this limitation through meetings between research staff to discuss data interpretation and alignment of criteria for findings.

One concern noted is not related to methodology or results of the study. The four Texas school districts included in the research failed to maintain progress after Texas increased academic expectations and assessment

requirements. As of 2006, none of the Texas school districts included in this study have achieved Recognized ratings under the revised TEA Accountability System.

Similar research is found in Cawelti's study, "High Student Achievement: How Six School Districts Changed Into High Performance Systems" (2001a). Cawelti included districts which had initially been identified by US Department of Education staff for having made substantial achievement gains with high-poverty student populations. Cawelti selected six districts from an original list of seventy-five including three Texas districts, Brazosport, Ysletta, and Houston ISD. Most, though not all, of the districts received on-site visits that included interviews with the superintendent, central-office staff, principals, and teachers. These interviews were augmented by a small number of classroom visits. District documents and assessment results were also examined.

The research is presented in five separate case studies (two districts' case studies were combined). This allowed for preservation of individual responses to reform rather than generalized results. Cawelti concluded that all the districts succeeded by focusing on three main channels: establishing standards, using the knowledge base, and restructuring for greater accountability. Expanded research findings address six main areas: the superintendent and other leaders nurtured and supported shared beliefs about learning, high expectations and a focus on results; decentralized management systems and budgeting resulted in increased accountability by linking people to results; aligned curriculum combined with

item analysis and individual student analysis of ongoing assessment results provided informed targeted instruction; processes developed increased teachers' abilities to organize instruction based on assessment results, provide tutoring, and frequent practice of tested skills; and sustained change over a period of years.

Though the individualized reporting of results serves as a strength of this study, the inconsistency of the research method and non-specificity of the selection criteria are limitations. Also, as reported for the earlier study by Skrla et al. (2000), Cawelti's study did not include any comparison data with districts that had not achieved academic success. Furthermore, the Texas districts chosen for Cawelti's research have not maintained academic achievement gains and received a Recognized rating under the more rigorous requirements of the current Texas Accountability System.

Other researchers of district-level improvement efforts include Green and Etheridge. In 2001, Green and Etheridge presented the findings of a three-year study funded by the National Education Association (NEA), "Collaborating to Establish Standards and Accountability: Lessons Learned about Systemic Change". The purpose of this study was to review and analyze systemic change designed to improve learning standards and accountability measures. Rather than selecting districts on the basis of student achievement outcomes, the researchers asked selected districts to supply evidence of two or more of the following educational procedures: establishing an alliance with NEA for the purpose of

addressing standards, assessment, and accountability systems; changes in teaching practice to support student standards; building connections between standards, programs, and achievement; and utilizing collective bargaining. Thus, the study began by selecting districts which had already established strategies NEA believed had a direct relationship to student achievement. The researchers selected the following indicators of success: establishment of standards, support for professional development, implementation of programs, and collaboration. Thus the same set of criteria used to determine inclusion in the study also served as the basis for determining which districts had achieved success.

Utilizing grounded theory, the researchers discovered patterns revealed through both individual and group recorded interviews with superintendents, principals, school board members, teachers and parents conducted over a two to three day period. Interviews explored “identifying changed roles, key participants, sequence of key events, and nature of outcomes” (p. 822). Results from each district were separately summarized and then each summary was coded to determine the dominant themes and processes in place across settings. Verification visits were conducted in year three.

Specific findings suggest the following themes: creative tension and dissatisfaction with the status quo established the need for change; focused and flexible leadership; participation from stakeholders; commitment and focus on

core values which included student outcomes; collaborative relationships between the district and unions; and targeted, strategic professional development.

Strengths of this study include an initial criteria based on processes established in the district and the follow up verification visits conducted at some districts. Limitations include the inconsistency of research parameters from site to site and no reported confirmation that the changes in the district structure had resulted in improved student achievement. As noted earlier, a further limitation is using the same criteria to select a district for inclusion in the study as well as judge district success. No comparison information is presented to determine if elements identified for successful reform are, or are not, present in districts that have not yet achieved success.

In their study entitled, “Beyond Islands of Excellence: What Districts Can Do to Improve Instruction and Achievement”, Togneri and Anderson (2003a) set out to determine how five districts, including Aldine, Texas, had improved instructional delivery as evidenced by increasing student achievement scores. Conducted as a project of the Learning First Alliance, each district considered for the study had to serve high concentrations of students from poverty and demonstrate district demographics supporting diverse ethnic makeup including growing numbers of English as a Second Language Learners. These selected districts had to demonstrate at least three years of increasing student achievement in reading and math as well as a decrease in the measured achievement gap across



grade levels, economic levels, and ethnicity. In addition to academic results, studied districts had to be recommended by external educational leaders as exemplars of district-directed professional development.

Over the course of at least two site visits, Learning First Alliance team members conducted individual interviews, focus groups, school visits, analyzed district data, and reviewed professional development documents. Togneri and Anderson identified seven factors critical for successful district-level reform: public acceptance of poor performance and the courage to create change; district-level approaches to instructional improvement including curriculum development and coaching from district and campus leaders; widespread vision on high-performance for all students; use of data to drive decisions and budget allocations, district-level professional development models and strategies deployed systematically at campus sites; redefined and re-distributed leadership roles; accountability for outcomes; and making a long term commitment to reform.

Other areas of significance noted by the researchers included strengthened relationships around a common purpose between district administrators, campus principals, central office staff, and school board members. Budgetary decisions followed the goals of the district allowing for more innovation and support in the areas of student achievement. The authors also listed ten lessons learned: districts can make a difference; let truth be heard; focus on instruction to improve student achievement; improve instruction through a coherent, system-wide approach;

make decisions based on good data; rethink professional development; require everyone to have a role in improving instruction; working together takes work; there are no quick fixes; substantial re-alignment must happen in structures and funding to support successful change.

Strengths of this study include confirmation of district effectiveness through data analysis requiring measured achievement gains and reduction of achievement gaps between student population groups. Researchers utilized consistent methods from district to district. Separate case studies reflected individual differences that informed generalized findings. As noted for the other studies reviewed, no comparison data of districts that had not been successful was included. Once again, a concern is noted that the Texas district included in this study has not maintained progress under the more rigorous academic achievement standards adopted by the state. Further study is needed to determine why, if key elements identified through this research were in place, progress was not maintained.

Completed by Snipes and Casserly (2004), “The Council of Great City Schools Case Studies of Urban Districts” research examined three urban districts, including a Texas school district, Houston ISD, that had demonstrated significant improvement trends in student achievement data across populations. The researchers attempted to describe the context of each studied district; the effective

elements that had improved student achievement; as well as connections between district-level policies and campus practice.

In addition to studying effective districts, the researchers also examined districts that had not improved student achievement. The comparison of contexts and strategies used by districts that resulted in student achievement gains, with those that did not, led researchers to the following conclusion, “the school district can be a powerful force for reform, either driving educational and instructional improvement or hindering efforts to pursue reform” (Snipes & Casserly, 2004, p. 135).

The researchers conclude that pre-conditions for reform must be established which include: definition of roles for school board members focused on policy rather than daily operations; development of a shared vision adopted by key stakeholders; ability to diagnose district’s problems; willingness and ability to redesign district systems to support learning and schools; and allocation of resources to support reform. Once these pre-conditions are in place, the successful districts studied had focused on student achievement at all levels of the organization; created accountability systems utilized by classroom teachers, campus and district leaders; focused on the lowest performing schools; unified the curriculum; provided district-directed, site-delivered professional development through ongoing job-embedded learning formats; provided central office support

at the school site; relentlessly used data; focused on Pre-K and elementary first; and created specific strategies for secondary students.

Strengths of this study include an established criteria for district inclusion based on measured student achievement gains and reduction of achievement gaps over time; comparison of effective district context and strategies with those districts that had yet to yield positive student achievement results; and extensive supporting data included in the full report (Snipes, Doolittle, & Herlihy, 2002). A limitation may be the reliance on retrospective information rather than first hand-experience with the studied districts. Once again, the Texas school district included in the study has not maintained measured progress under the more rigorous accountability standards established by TEA.

The final research reviewed here concerns a longitudinal study conducted by Kim and Crasco, “Best Policies and Practices in Urban Educational Reform: A Summary of Empirical Analysis Focusing on Student Achievement and Equity” (2006). Districts selected for this study had previously elected to adopt a specific model of district-level reform, Urban Systemic Initiative (USI) sponsored by the National Science Foundation. The USI systemic reform model was offered to urban districts with grant funding for implementation in 1994. Districts with the largest numbers of students living in poverty were selected for the grants and agreed to adopt the policies and practices outlined in the model. Included in the initial USI grant were a total of 22 districts, including four Texas school districts:

Dallas, El Paso, Houston, and San Antonio. Together these 22 districts served a combined enrollment of over 4.75 million students with 70% eligible for free and reduced lunch.

This was a mixed methods study that included both quantitative and qualitative measures and analysis utilizing the Key Indicator Data System developed by Systemic Research Inc. Over a six year period, data on achievement results in the areas of mathematics and science, enrollment in upper division courses, graduation rates, graduation plan selections, advanced placement results, national assessment data, teacher certification, and professional development data were collected. This information was supplemented by site-visits, interviews with focus groups, and teacher surveys.

The researchers found systemic reform related to “four process drivers: standards-based curriculum, instruction, and assessment; policy; resources; and broad-based support for reform and two student outcome drivers: student achievement and improvement of the historically underserved” (Kim & Crasco, 2006, p. 19). Districts studied had focused on classroom issues through district-directed curriculum, instruction, and assessment, supported by policies for high-quality learning and teaching including professional development and student support. District resource allocation focused on a convergence of educational resources to achieve targeted academic improvement. Through partnerships with

key stakeholders and collaboration between district, campus, and community leadership, the successful districts achieved broad-based support.

The reported results of implementing the USI model were an increase in overall academic achievement, particularly in the areas of mathematics and science that included non-assessment based data such as enrollment in higher level courses, increasing the percentage of students graduating, as well as increasing the percentage of students graduating on more challenging academic plans. The studied districts also had gains in closing measured achievement gaps.

The extensive and thorough systematic collection of data over a period of six years lends strength to this study. The school districts included in the study had all met the criteria of serving large numbers of ethnically diverse students and large percentages of low income families. Though the data gathering described was the most in-depth of the research reviewed for this paper, researchers for this study began with a model and may not have addressed outliers in the results. Since funding had been accepted by the districts studied, this may have influenced respondent answers to interview questions. The researchers acknowledge the lack of a control group was a further limitation of this study.

#### *Comparison of Recent Research on District-Level Success with Educational Frameworks*

Though it is not possible in the scope of this chapter to thoroughly analyze the results of these separate research studies in order to correlate the findings to

improvement in student achievement, it is possible to compare the findings identified in these research studies with the themes of the four educational frameworks introduced earlier in this chapter. Themes that emerged from an analysis of the educational frameworks served as start codes for a qualitative review of the findings from the six research studies. Each of the six studies has been summarized in tables presented in Appendix B.

These original start codes and descriptors included:

Leadership: the importance of strong leadership to motivate and facilitate the work;

Shared Mission, Vision, Planning, and Goals: a clear mission and vision supported by strategic planning at all levels of the organization and coordinated to achieve specific measurable goals;

Partnerships: developed through collaboration with key stakeholders including parents, community members, and staff;

Alignment of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment: to produce high standards and achieve results for all students;

Collaborative Climate: focused on people as resources through effective, ongoing, job-embedded professional development and teaming methods;

Process Management: examination of processes to determine the effectiveness of the systems;

Accountability and Results: through shared decision-making as well as shared responsibility for results;

Courage and Commitment: to begin the reform effort and carry it out in spite of setbacks encountered along the way.

A process involving analytic coding (Morse & Richards, 2002) was used to determine if the research findings reported by each research study reviewed fell within one of these original start codes. If not, additional codes were added. The majority of the research findings fit within the start code categories; however, additional codes developed through this process included:

External Context: state and federal accountability required the district to focus on closing the achievement gap;

Local Catalysts: events or series of events that required the district to confront and address previous inequities;

Required Pre-Conditions: having the capacity for reform, including the beliefs, people, and resources to initiate and sustain change;

Changing Role Definitions, with leaders focused on equity and learning and board members focusing on adopting policies that supported equity rather than day-to-day operations of the district; and

Resources Aligned to Goals: the need to target resources to the lowest performing schools, and channel resources to meet the most critical goals.

A conclusion drawn from this process is that there is considerable agreement between the findings extracted from recent research on district-level efforts to close achievement gaps with prior models developed for school and district reform. The results of this compilation of findings supports that educators have had access to identified elements for closing achievement gaps as outlined in the Effective Schools Correlates, and subsequent models since at least the 1970's. The question remains, if educators have known for over forty years what elements are needed for success, why have schools and districts not made more progress in



closing or eliminating ongoing gaps in academic achievement? The final section of this chapter attempts to answer this question through identification of areas for further research.

### *Implications for Further Research*

At least three directions for further study are suggested by this review of literature on district-level success in closing achievement gaps. One is to conduct follow up studies on districts included in prior research to determine whether or not previous achievement gains have been maintained over time. Texas districts included in the research reviewed have not maintained achievement gains as evidenced by lower accountability ratings under the current, more rigorous, state system. What is the cause for this stall in progress? Why haven't districts which had adopted successful elements identified by earlier studies not maintained progress under the more rigorous standards adopted by the state of Texas?

A second possibility for further research is to identify a single district in Texas that has achieved increased academic success and closed achievement gaps under the more rigorous Texas Accountability system. An in-depth single case study of this district can be compared to the findings of prior studies. This comparison could reveal if elements employed by currently successful districts are somehow different than the elements previously identified in those Texas districts that have not maintained academic achievement gains.

A third area for proposed research assumes that the elements of successful school reform, or the *what works*, to positively impact achievement for all students has been well established through the educational reform models previously presented and supported by findings of the six research studies examined in this chapter. What appears to be missing is not further delineation of *what* elements are needed to positively impact student achievement, but rather determination of *how* a district employed processes and strategies that resulted in closing achievement gaps. Therefore, the focus of this study will be a process study of how a Texas school district made progress in closing achievement gaps with all students.

### *Chapter Summary*

With the emphasis on academic achievement and accountability dictated by the *No Child Left Behind Act* and Texas Accountability System, schools can no longer hide poor academic results with minority students and students with economic challenges. Schools and school districts must seek out systematic reform that focuses resources on results through accountability measures and systems which take into account the needs of the community as well as the needs of individual students (Ragland, Asera, & Johnson, 1998).

Educational frameworks such as the Effective Schools Correlates, Baldrige Quality Improvement Criteria, Stupski Foundation Components, and Professional Learning Communities Characteristics, have identified key elements

of successful schools and organizations: leadership; shared mission, vision, planning, and goals; partnerships; alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment; collaborative climate focused on professional development; process management, accountability and results focus; courage; and commitment.

A review of recent research on districts that have achieved success in closing achievement gaps between student populations supports the key elements identified by these educational frameworks and adds a few more elements: external context; local catalysts; required pre-conditions; new role definitions; and alignment of resources to goals.

Each study reviewed came to the same conclusion, with the proper motivation, collective will, and tenacity, large districts serving ethnically diverse students from low income homes, can close the achievement gap and increase academic success for all students. Implications for further research suggest more knowledge is needed about the processes employed by a district to successfully close academic achievement gaps.

### Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to determine how a Texas school district made progress in closing achievement gaps with all students. The following describes the qualitative research methodology of a single case study conducted on a purposefully selected Texas school district. Information contained in this chapter includes research questions and research design including the methodology used, reasons supporting the selection of a qualitative design, and the strengths and limitations of this methodology. Sampling procedures used to select both the district and the specific participants from within the district are described. Development of the interview protocol is detailed along with a description of the procedure used to calibrate the interview questions. Finally, the method of analysis including the process utilized to identify themes and draw conclusions from the research data is explained.

#### *Background for Study*

Extensive education research has been conducted on improving academic outcomes and increasing measured achievement for all students (Cawelti, 2003). Much of this prior research has concentrated on classroom and school level processes and effects (Cuban & Usdan, 2002). Recently, more attention has focused on school districts that have demonstrated system-wide improvement in academic results and achieved academic gains for students who are ethnically diverse and/or from families with low income (Cawelti, 2001a; Cuban & Usdan,

2002; Fullan, Bertani, & Quinn, 2004; Green & Etheridge, 2001a; Morse & Richards, 2002; Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000; Snipes, Doolittle, & Herlihy, 2002; Togneri & Anderson, 2003a). Most of these recent district-level findings described elements that districts already had in place, or adopted in the course of actively closing achievement gaps. A summary of these findings presented in Chapter 2 revealed the following collective themes: leadership; shared mission, vision, planning, and goals; partnerships; alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment; collaborative climate focused on professional development; process management, accountability and results focus; courage; commitment; new role definitions; and alignment of resources to goals. Additional findings corresponded to what compelled some of these districts to undertake reforms including responsiveness to external contexts and local catalysts.

Findings from these district-level studies support earlier research conducted on successful schools serving high percentages of students from poverty included in the Effective Schools Correlates (Cuban & Usdan, 2002; DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; R. Edmonds, 1979; Lezotte & Bancroft, 1985) and also correspond to key elements of The Baldrige Quality Improvement Criteria (Baldrige National Quality Program, 2006), Stupski Foundation Components (Stupski Foundation, 2005), and Professional Learning Communities Characteristics (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

The considerable overlap revealed in the key elements identified by both recent and historical research implies that the knowledge of *what* is needed to improve achievement for all students has been identified for decades. What seems to be lacking in the body of research is an explanation of *how* a complex educational organization has accomplished a reduction in achievement gaps.

### *Purpose of the Study*

The state of Texas has set accountability criteria on the TAKS of 90% passing rates in all subject areas with all student populations for an Exemplary rating. A Recognized rating in 2006 required 70% passing rates for all subject areas with all student population groups, or at least a 65% passing rate (floor) and demonstration of Required Improvement (Texas Education Agency, 2006a). In 2006, Texas had 1033 public school districts and 194 charter operators. Of the more than 1200 education organizations, only 89 serve an enrollment of 10,000 students or more (Texas Education Agency, 2005-2006). Why is it that only fourteen (14) of these 89 large districts had met the state criteria for a Recognized Accountability rating in 2006? How have these fourteen large school districts achieved success in obtaining a Recognized Accountability rating when so many other districts have yet to accomplish this?

Collins (2001) studied the process used by business organizations to move from adequate results to excellent results in his book, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't*. While being far smaller in scope,

this research study of a single school district, attempted to uncover the process used by a complex educational organization to improve academic results. The purpose of this study is to determine how a Recognized Texas school district made progress in closing achievement gaps with all students.

### *Research Questions*

The purpose of basic academic research is to generate theory and discover truth, that is knowledge for the sake of knowledge. The purpose of applied research and evaluation is to inform action, enhance decision making, and apply knowledge to solve human and societal problems. (Patton, 1990, p. 12)

The desired result of the research informs the type of questions that it asks (McEwan & McEwan, 2003; Patton, 1990). The research contained in this paper seeks to enhance applied knowledge in the area of district-level success at closing or eliminating achievement gaps. McEwan and McEwan (2003) identify five basic research areas with corresponding questions:

The causal question: Does it work?  
The process question: How does it work?  
The cost question: Is it worthwhile?  
The usability questions: Will it work for me?  
The evaluation question: Is it working for me? (p. 4).

The research questions guiding this study fall within the process category defined by McEwan and McEwan.

1. How did a school district in Texas make progress toward closing achievement gaps across all population groups as measured by the State Accountability System?

2. How did the district select which processes and/or strategies to employ in order to make progress toward closing student achievement gaps across all population groups?
3. How did the district implement the identified processes and/or strategies to make progress toward closing student achievement gaps across all population groups?

### *Research Design*

Research design decisions need to be based on what it is the research has set out to examine (Cary, 1999; McEwan & McEwan, 2003; Trochim, 2001) as well as on the theoretical orientation of the researcher (Mertens, 2005). This researcher embraces a constructivist view of the world. Mertens describes the constructivist view as one believing “reality is not absolute, but is defined through community consensus” (p. 231). It is not this researcher’s intent to pre-define other’s experiences, but rather to view each individual’s experience through his or her own perceptions (Van Maanen, 1988).

### *Methodology*

Qualitative research is described by Trochim (2001, p. 152) as “a vast and complex area of methodology” and that it “has special value for investigating complex and sensitive issues” (p. 152). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) define qualitative research as follows:



a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations...qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring them. (p. 3)

Qualitative research begins without “imposing preexisting expectations on the phenomena under study” (Mertens, p. 230). The researcher can come into the study without a pre-assigned theory or model and allow the stated experiences of the actors to determine the direction of the research (Patton, 2002).

McEwen and McEwen (2003) list the following three principal characteristics of qualitative research: “naturalistic, descriptive, and focused on meaning and explanation” (p. 78). The acts of research and collection of data occur in as close to the natural occurring circumstances of the situation or actors being researched as possible (McEwan & McEwan, 2003). The descriptive qualities of qualitative research “permit inquiry into selected issues in great depth with careful attention to detail, context, and nuance” (Patton, 2002, p. 227). By framing the research within the world of the researched, “one can preserve the chronological flow, see precisely which events led to which consequences, and derive fruitful explanations” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 1). This study took place in the natural setting of the school district and provides descriptive information gathered from in situ respondents.

Mertens (2005) details seven main strategies used in qualitative research: ethnographic study, case study, phenomenological research, grounded theory, participatory research, clinical research, and focus groups. Two of these strategies, grounded theory and case study, will be explored here.

*Grounded Theory:* Originally developed by Glaser and Strauss, grounded theory is theory that is discovered from “data systematically obtained from social research” (1967, p. 2). Patton (2002) defines grounded theory as “the process of generating theory rather than a particular theoretical content” (p. 124). Through a careful ordering of questions, constant comparison of findings, observations, and experiences, the researcher attempts to allow the specific context of the situation to dictate the direction of the study. This methodology allows the outcome of the study to reflect the reality of the researched rather than the preconceived notions of the researcher. Grounded theory should not be used as a catch-all for inductive research, but as a tool for analyzing and making sense of raw data (Patton, 2002).

*Case Study:* Patton (2002) counsels that the primary concern in selecting a unit of analysis for a particular research study is deciding, “what it is you want to be able to say something about at the end of the study” (p. 229). A single case study allows for focused research on the unique aspects of the subject and is an appropriate unit of analysis when the researcher wants to provide in-depth, context specific research (Patton, 2002) Descriptions of what a case study entails differ slightly depending on the source. According to Mertens (2005), case study

“involves intensive and detailed study of one individual or of a group as an entity” (p. 237). McEwan and McEwan (2003) define case study as a strategy that allows the researcher to “focus on a particular aspect of organizational or human behavior” (p. 77). While Trochim (2001) offers, “an intensive study of a specific individual or specific context” (p. 345).

In the words of Robert E. Stake, as quoted in Patton (2002, p. 297) “We study a case when it itself is of very special interest. We look for the detail of interaction within its context...coming to understand its activity within important circumstances”. For the purposes of this research, the unit of special interest is a Texas school district that has achieved a Recognized rating and therefore this purposefully selected district serves as the unit of study.

#### *Rationalization for Selection of Methodology*

The choice of methodology must be dictated by the purpose of the study (Morse & Richards, 2002; Patton, 2002). The purpose of this study was to uncover the process used by a district to close achievement gaps with all students. Qualitative methodology is well suited to conducting research on processes.

Patton (2002) notes:

Qualitative inquiry is highly appropriate for studying process because (1) depicting process requires detailed descriptions of how people engage with each other, (2) the experience of process typically varies for different people so their experiences need to be captured in their words, (3) process is fluid and dynamic so it can't be fairly summarized on a single rating scale at one point in time, and (4) participants' perceptions are a key process consideration. (p. 159)

Morse and Richards (2002) contend that in some cases qualitative methods may be the only choice:

if the purpose is to learn from the participants in a setting or process the way *they* experience it, the meanings they put on it, and how they interpret what they experience, you need methods that allow you to discover and do justice to their perceptions and the complexity of their interpretations (p. 28 emphasis in original)

A qualitative methodology is the approach most likely to yield the rich description needed for this study of process.

Though a qualitative methodology informed the research, quantitative standards dictated the process of selecting the studied district. The Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) (Texas Education Agency, 2005) describes individual schools and districts through discrete data points covering a variety of areas including in part: academic achievement, attendance, per pupil expenditures, drop out rates, staff experience levels, and student mobility. Annual Accountability ratings are derived by comparing district data on four base indicators: TAKS, SDAA II, Completion I Rates and Drop Out Rates, to the criteria established by the state. While an Exemplary or Recognized rating denotes which districts have made progress in closing achievement gaps, the rating does not tell the story of *how* the individual Exemplary or Recognized districts accomplished this feat.

### *Strengths and Limitations of this Methodology*

Patton (2002), asserts that every research methodology has inherent strengths and limitations. Strengths associated with qualitative methodology include rich description, discovery of highly individualistic patterns, and inclusion of diverse and unexpected insights. Though the results of qualitative studies may not generalize to other contexts and settings, the deep, detailed, descriptions offered through open-ended interviews and observations may provide a clearer appreciation of a situation than a standardized data gathering system (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Having access to qualitative data through the expressed thoughts of respondents provides voice to the research through individual quotes (Patton, 1990). The qualitative researcher looks for patterns in responses, or lack of patterns, noted from one respondent to the next (Morse & Richards, 2002).

In a qualitative study, an individual response can maintain its own integrity and be appreciated holistically, rather than reduced into an aggregated response as is often the case in quantitative research (Patton, 2002). A qualitative study provides respondents an opportunity to share freely from their own experiences, thus encouraging diversity which may result in unusual responses (Mertens, 2005). Cary (1999) describes *unexpected stories*, as those that do not conform to generally accepted, or mainstream responses. Rather than being treated as outliers or aberrant data, these unanticipated responses may be critical to properly uncovering the true dynamics of a situation.

Limitations acknowledged in this study include its single case design, relatively small sample size of respondents, and the abilities and influence of the researcher. This is a single case study of a district that has received a state Recognized rating based in part on making progress in closing achievement gaps. It does not include comparison information with any other districts that have, or have not, been designated as Recognized.

The sample size and purposeful selection method of acquiring respondents is a further limitation. Interviews were conducted with only a fraction of the people represented by the school district and community. The respondents were purposefully selected for their district-level and campus-level perspectives and therefore only represent their own individual views, and not a cross-section of district members. Other viewpoints not solicited might have provided different perspectives on the processes used by the district to close achievement gaps.

Finally, the knowledge, abilities, and lived experiences of the researcher are a further limitation. If even subatomic particles are influenced by the act of being observed (Wheatley, 2006), then certainly human inquiry conducted through a qualitative research project will be impacted by the researcher, the researched, as well as through interactions between them (Morse & Richards, 2002; Patton, 2002; Trochim, 2001). What questions are asked, how the questions are posed, who is selected for interviews, and how the data is interpreted will all be impacted by the lived experiences of the single researcher conducting the study

(Merchant & Willis, 2001). “Understanding comes from trying to put oneself in the other person’s shoes, from trying to discern how others think, act, and feel” (Patton, 2002, p. 49). Establishment of rapport, or a lack of rapport, can affect the quality of interview results. As a White, female, with campus leadership experience, the researcher’s ethnicity, race, and/or perceived educational knowledge may have had an impact on the responses shared by those interviewed (Bettis & Adams, 2005).

These limitations are not seen as detractors from the study, rather the subjective nature of qualitative research opens opportunities for a richer experience between researcher and researched as well as the potential of greater depth and insight (Morse & Richards, 2002). With this said, it must be noted that the study represents this researcher’s first experience in conducting such a project.

### *Single Case Research Design*

This research represents a single case design with a Texas school district as the unit of analysis. The Texas Accountability System has a direct impact on this research. A brief explanation of the Texas Accountability System as it relates to the school district selection criteria for this study follows along with a description of both the purposive selection process used to identify the case study district and select individual respondents for the case study itself.

### *Texas Accountability System – Historical Reference*

In order to study the process used by a school district to close or eliminate achievement gaps, both a criteria for establishing success and a district deemed to be successful had to be identified. This research relied on the Texas Education Agency Accountability System criteria to identify which districts have made progress in closing achievement gaps.

The Texas Accountability System measures yearly student performance against a state standard to designate school and district ratings of Exemplary, Recognized, Acceptable, and Academically Unacceptable (Texas Education Agency, 2006a). One of the indicators used to determine Accountability ratings utilizes results from the state developed standardized test, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). It should be noted that the TAKS is considered far more rigorous than its predecessor, the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS).

In 2002, the last year of the TAAS, 149 Texas school districts received an Accountability rating of Exemplary (14%); 425 were rated Recognized (41%), 450 received Acceptable (43%) and only 14 districts received an Academically Unacceptable rating (1%). Under the TAAS performance expectation standards, over half of the districts (55%) had achieved a rating of Exemplary or Recognized including several districts that had high percentages of students living in poverty. These high poverty Exemplary and Recognized districts were the subjects of



several studies during this time period (Cawelti, 2001a; Hernandez, 2004; Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000).

In coordination with the federal *No Child Left Behind Act* (U. S. Congress, 2001a), Texas adopted a more rigorous assessment, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). Texas also re-calibrated its accountability system to create higher standards. The new system was introduced with a staged increase in standards and no accountability ratings were assigned until 2004.

Between 2004 and 2006, no school district with an enrollment greater than 7000 students has achieved a rating of Exemplary (Texas Education Agency, 2006c). In 2006, under the more rigorous assessments and standards, only 19 districts (1.5%) received an Exemplary rating. An additional 337 districts received a Recognized rating (27.5%). Only 16% of the districts with enrollments greater than 10,000 students earned a Recognized rating in 2006 (Texas Education Agency, 2006b).

#### *District Selection Process*

In order to select a district that represented a complex organizational system serving an ethnically and economically diverse student body, the following purposive selection criteria was established: the selected district would serve at least 10,000 students and have student population demographics for African American, Hispanic, White and Economically Disadvantaged students within plus or minus 20 points as compared to state student population

percentages. Note: This study has chosen not to include English Language Learners in the selection criteria as this population was not included in the 2006 Texas Accountability ratings.

Texas districts which had received a 2006 Exemplary or Recognized rating (349) were examined for enrollment size. As stated earlier, under the current criteria, no districts serving at least 10,000 students achieved an Exemplary rating in 2006. Of the 337 Recognized districts in 2006, only fourteen districts had enrollments of at least 10,000 students. These districts ranged in enrollment from 10,265 to 78,711 students. Next, demographic data from these fourteen (14) school districts was compared to state student demographics, with particular attention given to the percentage of Economically Disadvantaged students served.

The percentages of students eligible for free or reduced lunch in the 14 Recognized districts ranged from 6.7% to 87.2%. Only five (5) districts met the above criteria of at least 35% Economically Disadvantaged students. These five remaining districts ranged in percentages of Economically Disadvantaged students from 38.2% to 87.2%.

The final criteria, that the district serve an ethnically diverse student population yielded only four districts. The fifth district that had been previously identified had a single ethnic population that represented 97.5% of its student demographics. The remaining four districts' demographic details as compared to

state averages are listed below (Table 6). District 1 most closely approximated state demographic data across all reported descriptors, African American, Hispanic, White, and Economically Disadvantaged.

**Table 6 Comparison of Demographic Data of Districts that Met Research Criteria to State Averages**

<b>Population</b>	<b>Texas Student Percentage 2004-2005</b>	<b>District 1</b>	<b>District 2</b>	<b>District 3</b>	<b>District 4</b>
African-American	14.2	14.6	9.8	8.0	27.2
Hispanic	44.7	45.9	44.0	61.2	29.0
White	37.7	28.0	42.5	27.6	35.4
Economically Disadvantaged	54.6	51.0	38.2	49.2	49.6
Rating 2006		Recognized	Recognized	Recognized	Recognized
Rating 2005		Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable
Rating 2004		Acceptable	Recognized	Recognized	Acceptable

Discussions with state and regional leaders confirmed that any of the four districts, labeled 1, 2, 3, or 4 would serve as an excellent subject for this study.

The superintendent of the district labeled 1, was approached and granted permission for the study to be conducted. The pseudonym created for the district for the purposes of this study is Village ISD.

#### *Respondent Selection Process*

A district serving over 10,000 students employs thousands of people. It would be beyond the scope of this study to interview even 1% of the staff. In order to sample key stakeholders, the researcher adopted a criterion sampling design (Mertens, 2005). Individuals who serve Village ISD in the following roles

were included in the sampling criteria: superintendent; assistant superintendents; district-level directors; school board members; and selected principals representing all three school levels.

The goal of the study was to uncover the processes a district utilized. An assumption has been made that this process took place over a period of time, therefore, a criteria was set that respondents had served a minimum of four years in the district. This initial criterion sample yielded over 60 potential respondents. The district's superintendent had an opportunity to review the list of potential respondents and offer input. The superintendent and all assistant superintendents were included as respondents. The remaining respondents were randomly selected from the pool of each category of respondents: directors, board of trustee members, and one principal from each from each level elementary, middle, and high school. Two additional principals were added as respondents during the study in order to gain comparative perspectives from same level (middle school) principals whose campuses had been rated academically acceptable, recognized, and exemplary. A final principal respondent who did not meet the initial research criteria of serving a minimum of four years was added to provide the perspective of a principal with recent experience in another district. This principal had over twenty years experience in a nearby district and had joined Village ISD the previous year.

### *Respondent Description*

Respondents were purposefully selected to provide a district-level and campus-level perspective of the processes employed by Village ISD to close achievement gaps. Summary information on the number of years of experience in the district and gender of the respondents by job category follows (Table 7). The eighteen respondents included the following: one superintendent, four assistant superintendents, five directors at the district-level, two board of trustee members, and six principals. Respondents disaggregated by gender indicate eight females, including the superintendent and ten males.

**Table 7 Village ISD Respondent Information**

<b>Respondent Title</b>	<b>Number of Years in District</b>	<b>Gender</b>
Superintendent	10	F
Assistant Superintendent	19	M
Assistant Superintendent	16	M
Assistant Superintendent	11	M
Assistant Superintendent	27	F
Executive Director	13	M
Executive Director	19	F
Director	10	F
Director	18	F
Director	27	M
Board of Trustee Member	6	F
Board of Trustee Member	12*	F
Principal High School	9	M
Principal Middle School	4	M
Principal Middle School	10	M
Principal Middle School	7	M
Principal Elementary	7	F
Principal Elementary	1	M

\* Respondent taught in Village ISD for thirty years before retiring and serving four terms as a school board member

### *Procedures and Data Collection*

A description of the instruments used in this study, the development of these instruments, and procedures for data collection follows. Both Mertens (2005) and Patton (2002) contend that the researcher is the primary instrument of qualitative studies. Since this study represents the first major qualitative project undertaken by this researcher, ongoing support, input, and insights have been sought from others more knowledgeable in qualitative research design, data gathering, data analysis, and interpretation.

In addition to the prominent role played by the investigator/researcher, the literature on qualitative research identifies three main data sources: in-depth interview, direct observation, and written documents (Mertens, 2005; Patton, 1990; Trochim, 2001). For this study, a triangulation of all three data sources informed the findings (Mertens, 2005).

*Interview.* Interviews are a method for uncovering the personal perspectives of individual respondents. “Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit” (Patton, 2002, p. 341). Since it was essential to uncover individual perspectives, one on one, semi-structured interviews comprised the majority of the data gathered and analyzed. The original interview questions developed by the researcher were modified after discussions with superintendents and other state and regional educational leaders. Pilot interviews (Morse & Richards, 2002) with

an assistant superintendent and principal employed outside Village ISD further refined the interview questions. By using a semi-structured format, the researcher remained open to unexpected responses (Morse & Richards, 2002; Patton, 2002). The semi-structured interview guidelines used for the study can be found in Appendix C.

Respondent consent to participate and permission to record the interview was secured at the start of each interview. A copy of the consent form is included in Appendix D. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The majority of the interview sessions were approximately sixty minutes in length. Interviews were conducted with the superintendent at the beginning of data gathering and towards the conclusion of the study. All other respondents participated in only one interview.

*Direct Observation.* Direct observation served as the second method for data gathering. Direct observation allows the researcher to reflect on and absorb the environment of the subject of a study. Patton (2002) describes several advantages of researchers conducting personal observations in order to directly experience the context of the setting: observer researchers gain greater understanding when they share the lived experiences of the respondents; direct observation “allows an inquirer to be open, discovery oriented, and inductive” (p. 262); as an outside observer, the researcher may become aware of factors that have been previously unnoticed by participants, or topics participants have

avoided sharing; observation provides “a more comprehensive view of the setting” (p. 264); and the perceptions developed during the observation will serve as an additional form of data to be used during interpretation of the findings.

In this study, the researcher observed meetings attended by both district staff and community members. These observations included the following: a cabinet meeting attended by the superintendent, assistant superintendents and other central office staff members; a school board meeting; and a full day of principal professional development. A template for observation field notes is included in Appendix E. Field notes developed by the researcher during observations were analyzed and included in the findings.

*Document Review.* Document examination served as the third source of data. “Documents frequently give important clues to the history of the setting” (Morse & Richards, 2002, p. 149). While it was not possible to examine all district documents, documents that provided a perspective of the district as a whole as well as those documents critical to the processes employed by the district to close achievement gaps were scrutinized. Documents reviewed included the district strategic plan, Campus Support Team protocols, curriculum and instruction tools, and professional development resources. Sources for these documents included the district website, informational pamphlets produced by the district, and documents supplied on request from district-level departments, or



individual respondents. A list of documents included in the analysis is listed in Appendix F.

### *Data Analysis*

“The challenge of qualitative analysis lies in making sense of massive amounts of data,” (Patton, 2002, p. 432). This study included data collected through approximately eighteen hours of semi-structured interviews, direct observation of twelve hours of meetings, and over thirty documents. Each of these data sources were examined through a grounded theory process outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998) that includes three stages of coding: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Mertens, 2005).

#### *Open Coding*

In constant comparative method, data analysis begins as soon as the researcher begins to gather data (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Morse & Richards, 2002). Interviews were transcribed, district documents collected, and direct observation notes were coded using an open coding method. At this stage, “the researcher must take apart an observation, a sentence, or a paragraph and give each discrete incident, idea, or event a name or label that stands for or represents a phenomenon” (Mertens, 2005, p. 424). Open coding is an iterative process (Patton, 2002). The codes developed during this initial stage were reviewed and refined through multiple passes with the data. This process continued throughout the data collection phase in order to “cycle back and forth between thinking about

the existing data and generating strategies for collecting new, often better, data” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 50).

### *Axial Coding*

While open coding attempts to name and categorize individual incidents, axial coding is the “process of relating categories to their subcategories, termed ‘axial’ because coding occurs around the axis of the category” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 123). At this stage, patterns, relationships, and connections between the data, “bring the complexity of the context back into the picture” (Mertens, 2005, p. 424). As possible relationships are identified, the researcher continues to search for additional evidence to refute or support the presence or absence of these relationships. This is considered a critical stage in grounded theory analytic process (Mertens, 2005; Patton, 2002). Individual codes generated through the open coding process were organized in themes based on critical attributes to identify categories. These initial category groupings were re-analyzed to determine relationships between categories and the subcategories. At this stage, some categories were collapsed and others formed as details related to characteristics were refined. Categories were then analyzed in relationship to the three research questions.

### *Selective Coding*

The final stage, selective coding, is what sets grounded theory apart from simply naming or categorizing phenomenon. Mertens (2005) explains:

The model includes an explication of the conditions, context, strategies, and consequences identified in the axial coding phase. You then validate your theory by grounding it in the data; if necessary, you seek additional data to test the theory. (p. 424)

The researcher attempts to tell the story revealed by the data by establishing a central category and relating all the other categories to this central category (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Further analysis of the categories generated through axial coding served to identify drivers and other relationships. This process revealed a central category supported by two secondary categories. Findings from the study are reported in Chapter Five. Conclusions based on the findings are detailed in Chapter Six.

#### *Technology Usage*

This study incorporated several technology tools. Use of a digital recorder allowed the researcher to electronically capture interviews and field notes for later transcription. Interviews were transcribed by the researcher through a combination of word processing and Dragon NaturallySpeaking voice recognition software. The researcher listened to each interview at least three times including: during the initial interview with respondent, while transcribing the interview, and again when checking the transcribed interview for accuracy.

Analysis of transcribed interviews was conducted with support from HyperResearch Qualitative Analysis Tool. This sophisticated research software permitted instant electronic access to coded materials which could then be sorted

by respondent, respondent category, or code. Codes listed by frequency allowed additional analysis regarding the relative depth of a particular code in the data. Consistency within codes was verified by listing and reading through all text sections marked with the same code. This technology usage enhanced the research through the ease of coding, re-coding, and reporting supported by the HyperResearch software.

### *Reliability and Validity*

Patton asserts “the validity and reliability of qualitative data depend to a great extent on the methodological skill, sensitivity, and integrity of the researcher” (1990, p. 11). As noted previously, this study represents the first major qualitative research undertaken by this investigator. The steps taken to increase the reliability and validity of this study are outlined below.

In the introduction to their book, *Qualitative Data Analysis*, Miles and Huberman (1994) state that a major drawback on the use of qualitative data is that a single set of data can be interpreted in as many ways as there are researchers to interpret it. Other researchers agree, the discipline lacks a standard for analysis (Mertens, 2005; Patton, 2002). As this research represents a single case study, there is no expectation that the findings from this study will generalize to other settings; however, reliability can also be addressed through “rigorous and systematic data collection procedures” (Patton, 2002, p. 545) as well as detailed description of these data collection and analysis methods. An attempt has been

made to clearly outline the steps and processes used in this study so that the process can be replicated by other researchers.

Miles and Huberman (1994), suggest the following question be considered in research quality and integrity, “is my study being conducted carefully, thoughtfully, and correctly in terms of some reasonable set of standards?” (p. 294). Mertens (2005) describes criteria developed by Guba and Lincoln for evaluating quality in qualitative research including: credibility, transferability, confirmability, authenticity, and emancipatory. Purposeful attention to aspects of credibility, transferability, and confirmability are outlined below.

### *Credibility*

Credibility concerns the length of engagement with the subject of the study, actively seeking negative examples that will refute findings, triangulation, and member checks (Mertens, 2005). Preparation for the research and initial data gathering began in October 2006 through review of public information on Village ISD including AEIS reports, AYP results, and conversations with state and regional educational leaders. Examination of public documents continued until consent to participate in the research study had been secured from district officials and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval had been received. The researcher made three trips to the district between May and June 2007 including one full week of research. Data collection continued until saturation was reached (Morse & Richards, 2002). Triangulation of data was conducted by comparing data

gathered through the three data sources: interviews, direct observation, and document reviews. Since “the purpose of qualitative research is to describe or understand phenomena of interest from the participant’s eyes” (Trochim, 2001, p. 162) initial findings were shared with the superintendent and other district members and a final member check occurred with the superintendent at the conclusion of the study.

### *Transferability*

As stated previously, this research does not attempt to provide findings that can be automatically generalized to other settings. Transferability has been addressed through “extensive and careful description of the time, place, context, and culture” (Mertens, 2005, p. 256). The thick description supplied in Chapter Four will allow the reader to discern the degree of compatibility between the district under study and other contexts.

### *Confirmability*

Mertens (2005) states confirmability is the qualitative equivalent to objectivity. Qualitative researchers must “disclose their biases, predispositions, and even connections to the subject of the study” (McEwan & McEwan, 2003, p. 84). The researcher has served as an educator in Texas for over eighteen years and has fulfilled the following roles: elementary and secondary special education teacher; elementary general education teacher; elementary assistant principal; elementary, middle school, and ninth grade center principal; and university staff

member associated with principal development. The researcher is currently pursuing a doctorate degree in educational administration. Certainly the roles served by the researcher and her primarily campus-level perspective may have influenced the research findings; however, no prior professional or personal connection to the subject district existed before the research began.

### *Summary of Chapter Three*

While there have been recent studies of the strategies and elements present in districts that have closed achievement gaps, there has been less research on how districts have achieved this success. Since the purpose of this research was to determine how a Texas school district made progress in closing achievement gaps with all students, a qualitative methodology has been selected.

Research questions, design, methodology and methods proposed for this study have been explained along with supporting documentation from respected practitioners in the field of research (McEwan & McEwan, 2003; Mertens, 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Morse & Richards, 2002; Patton, 2002). The criterion established for both the purposeful selection of the district and respondents has been detailed. A qualitative methodology employing grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and a single case design had been selected as the most relevant plan to conduct this study of district process. Rich descriptions and individualistic responses serve as major strengths of a qualitative methodology. Limitations

include the lack of the ability to generalize findings, the small sample size, and the absence of a comparison district.

An outline of the procedures for data collection for three main data sources: semi-structured interviews, direct observation, and document review has been detailed. All data collection and analysis were conducted by a single researcher/observer. Data analysis followed the structure recommended for grounded theory: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The quality of the research has been augmented through adherence to reliability and validity through credibility, transferability, and confirmability.



### *Calendar of Events*

The following Calendar of Events presents a brief description of proposed activities and timelines:

April 2007	Research Proposal presented to Dissertation Committee Members for input and approval to advance to candidacy; Institutional Review Board Application submitted for approval; Temporary approval from selected district sought;
May 2007	After final approval is received from both IRB and the selected district, preliminary meetings will be requested and scheduled with selected district members;
June 2007	Data collection and initial analysis begins
July 2007	Continuation of data collection and analysis of data
August 2007	Write up of findings and conclusions
September 2007	Submission of findings and conclusion to dissertation chair
October 2007	Submission of findings and conclusions to dissertation committee Members
November 2007	Presentation of final dissertation defense

## Chapter 4: Village Independent School District

Village ISD has been the subject of a single case study to uncover how the district made progress in closing achievement gaps. This district was one of four Texas school districts that had met the research criteria of having received a Recognized rating in 2006 while serving more than 10,000 ethnically, and economically diverse students. While the results of a qualitative study are not expected to generalize to other settings, transferability can be improved through a thick description of the context and setting (Mertens, 2005). The sections that follow describe a brief history of the district, provide information on demographic trends, governance and organizational structures that impact the district, financial information, achievement results, and unique educational programs and initiatives currently offered in Village ISD.

### *Brief History*

According to district historical documents, children have been attending private schools in the Village area since at least 1856. Established as an Independent School District by the state of Texas in 1901, the newly formed Village ISD served a farming community located on the outskirts of a growing metropolitan area. The entire school district was housed in a two-story “unpainted, clap-board structure” (Waggoner, 1990, p. 3, Appendix F) until 1915 with the construction of a two-story brick school building.

A respondent who had moved to the area in the mid-1950's, recalled how there had been only one small grocery store in town. In 1954, Village ISD incorporated parts of another farming community when its school district disbanded operations. In the 90 years since the district's original two story brick school house first welcomed students, the expanses of cotton and hay fields have given way to industrial, commercial, retail, and housing areas. The once open fields of farmland have been transformed into a densely populated suburban area governed by six separate city municipalities.

The district has grown from serving about 200 children from farming families to an enrollment of over 26,000 representing an increasingly diverse student body. There are still vast tracts of undeveloped land within the 53.42 squares miles (Village ISD 2006-2007, Facts & Figures) of district boundaries, but district officials note that most of this remaining acreage is designated for commercial use.

During the economic boom years experienced in Texas in the 1970's and 1980's, Village ISD experienced a surge in tax base with the construction of high end suburban housing neighborhoods. According to a respondent who worked in the district during these years, the increased revenues were used to augment teacher and administrator salaries which allowed Village ISD to compete for the best and the brightest educators in this thriving high-growth metropolitan area. It was during this time period that Village ISD began to make a name for itself

among Texas school districts as a leader in instructional innovation and curriculum.

### *Demographic Trends*

Village ISD, which just twenty years ago would have been described as an affluent, White majority school district, has become progressively more diverse as more prosperous families continue to migrate from this increasingly urban area to the outer rings of suburban growth. Data displayed below (Table 8) demonstrates the demographic changes experienced in Village ISD from 1991 to 2006 and offers comparison data with state demographic averages of the same time period. While population percentages for African American students have remained stable at the state level, Village ISD's percentage of African American students has doubled in the past fifteen years. The population of Hispanic students in Village ISD has risen from 18%, approximately half that of the state percentage in 1991 (34%) to a nearly equal percentage in 2006, 46% and 45% respectively. Finally, a comparison of percentages of Economically Disadvantaged students in 2006 reveals a mere 6 percentage points separate Village ISD (51%) from the state average (57%).

**Table 8 Demographic Percentages for Village ISD and the State of Texas from 1991 and 2006**

**Village ISD**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Total Enrollment</b>	<b>African American</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Hispanic</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Econ. Disadv.</b>
<b>1991</b>	<b>17,517</b>	7%	9%	18%	66%	21%
<b>2006</b>	<b>26,153</b>	15%	12%	46%	28%	51%

**State of Texas**

<b>1991</b>	495,383	14%	2%	34%	49%	<b>46*%</b>
<b>2006</b>	664,242	15%	4%	45%	37%	57%

**Note: 1994 is first year data located for state percentage of economically disadvantaged.**

District leaders noted that as neighborhoods have matured, enrollment within specific school sites has ebbed and flowed. The most recent growth in enrollment has been attributed to families with young children moving into areas that had previously housed retirees, combined with the impact of families with greater numbers of children entering the district, and finally economic conditions that have created the need for multiple families to share housing expenses and homes.

*Vision and Mission*

Though the school district has experienced dramatic economic and social changes in the past fifteen years, district and community members have sought to surpass Village ISD's previous academic accomplishments. Village ISD has developed a vision statement to guide the district's advancement:

All students will meet the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) at the proficient or commended level and graduate college-ready without remediation. (Village ISD website, June 2007)

The significance of this vision statement is that it is measurable. Each year, the district can assess progress and determine whether or not the vision has been realized.

While the vision statement is focused and measurable, the mission statement is more broadly stated (district website, June 2007):

Together with families and community, we commit all district resources to guide the learning of each student to graduate as:

- A responsible individual
- A passionate life-long learner
- A complex thinker
- An effective communicator who understands and respects our global interdependence

The district disseminates both the vision and mission statements through its website, district documents, and other communication tools with teachers, parents, students, and staff.

### *Governance and Organizational Structure*

#### *City Government Structure*

Village ISD serves six different municipalities. While it is not unusual for Texas school districts to serve students from more than one city or town, serving students from six different city governments, which represent communities with vast differences in concentrations of family income and ethnicity presents distinctive challenges. During the time of this study, governmental actions by one of the cities served by Village ISD received national attention. In response to a

growing influx of immigrants, the city government passed and attempted to enforce new laws that imposed strict legal sanctions against landlords discovered to be renting to undocumented immigrants. These new laws have been contested in a series of court actions and at the time of the publication of this report, final legal decisions are still pending.

According to several respondents in this study, the controversies that originated in this city began to spill over into the schools resulting in negative feelings toward a now majority Latino population. Respondents reported city officials went so far as to pressure Village ISD school board members to restrict enrollment of immigrant and English Language Learner children. The Village ISD board of trustees has distanced itself from these issues and has maintained a focus on educating all children. As one board member explained:

It can't be that way because we're not there for the cities. We are there for the kids. That issue must never be forgotten. And if you go on the board with anything else in mind except supporting the families and the children in this district and of their education you are there for the wrong reasons. It is a school board. Not a city board.

As stated by the board member, city government and school districts are legally separate entities; however, there is a symbiotic relationship between school districts and the municipal governments in which they are located. The school district's educational ratings and reputation can influence local housing markets and be determinates for business consideration in locating new facilities in an area. City governments preside over zoning decisions that impact where schools

and neighborhoods can be built, influencing the density of enrollment and often controlling utility services, road maintenance, and other infrastructure systems that impact school facilities. These examples illustrate that though school district and city officials represent separate organizations, actions taken by one governing body can have an impact on the other.

#### *District Organization*

In 2006, Village ISD employed 3154 people. Information from the AEIS report (Table 9) shows that of the total number of staff, 57% were teachers, 3.2 % campus administrators, 9% professional support, 7% educational aides, 23% auxiliary staff, and just .8% central administration personnel. This percentage of central administration staff is less than the state average of 1%.

The central office is led by the superintendent and her administrative team of four assistant superintendents who each lead a specific area of responsibility: administration personnel; curriculum and instruction; student, family, and community service; and support service. Central office directors who report to the assistant superintendents have other support staff assigned to them to assist with the work.



**Table 9 Village ISD Staff Information from 2006 AEIS Report**

<b>District Role Percent of Staff</b>	<b>Teachers</b> 56.8%	<b>Professional Support</b> 8.9%	<b>Campus Administration</b> 3.2%	<b>Central Administration</b> 0.8%	<b>Educational Aides</b> 7.4%	<b>Auxiliary Staff</b> 22.9%
<b>Demographics Percent of Teachers</b>	<b>African American</b> 6.0%	<b>Hispanic</b> 9.1%	<b>White</b> 82.6%	<b>Asian Pacific Islander</b> 1.7%	<b>Males</b> 20.5%	<b>Females</b> 79.5%
<b>Years of Experience Percent of Teachers</b>	<b>Beginning</b> 9.6%	<b>1-5 Years</b> 36.0%	<b>6-10 Years</b> 23.4%	<b>11-20 Years</b> 17.9%	<b>Over 20 Years</b> 13.1%	

Staff information data demonstrates that at this time, district demographics for staff and students are not aligned by ethnicity or gender. Furthermore, the distribution of teachers with five years or less experience (45.6%) is closely matched with those who have six or more years of experience (54.4%). The teacher turnover rate reported in 2006 was 17.7%, which is somewhat higher than the state average teacher turnover rate of 14.6%.

There are 41 schools in the district: a Pre-Kindergarten center, 27 elementary schools, six middle schools, five high schools including an Early College Program, an alternative school of choice, and a disciplinary alternative education center. Each of these schools has an assigned principal and, depending on the level of the school and enrollment, one or more assigned assistant, or associate principals.

Texas school districts are governed by elected boards of education. There are seven members on the Village ISD board of trustees with each member

serving a three year term. Board members may be elected to an unlimited number of terms. Several members of the Village ISD board have served multiple terms, and the current president is serving his twelfth year as a board of trustee member. While the state of Texas delineates areas of jurisdiction for school boards and district administration, conflicts can occur between boards and administration, particularly if the board tries to expand beyond policy decisions and influence day to day operations (Snipes & Casserly, 2004). A Board member interviewed for this study stressed the governance responsibilities of the Village ISD board:

I think that it's important to remember that the scope of the board's responsibility is not to micromanage. Our responsibility is to hire a superintendent and then obviously to set policy and goals as well as the budget and the tax rate.

Elected school boards are intended to represent the local populace in making educational policy decisions. The composition of the board of trustees during 2006 was four White females and three White males which does not reflect current population demographics of the school district. Board of trustee members in Village ISD are elected at large; board members run for a place on the board that is not specific to a geographic area. The school board has previously explored, but not adopted, single member district voting.

#### *District Financial Information*

While Village ISD was experiencing tremendous growth during the 1970's, 80's and 90's, the Texas school finance system was challenged in a series

of lawsuits which brought to light the intolerable inequities of the state funding system. Property poor districts through a combination of local property tax effort and state finance support were raising about half the amount of money to educate each child as compared to property rich districts which could levy a smaller property tax rate and still receive additional state funding (Bosworth, 2001). As a result of these lawsuits the Texas public school finance system was declared unconstitutional (Kozol, 1992) and Texas received a court order to develop a system that would equalize funding available per child.

Due to its strong tax base and property wealth, under the revised state finance system, Village ISD was designated as a Chapter 41 district. In order for Texas to equalize funding among school districts, Village ISD sends part of its local tax revenue to the state which re-distributes the funds to other Texas districts that have less valuable revenue resources.

District documents for 2006-2007 financial information (General Fund Information, June 4, 2007) estimate total revenues of \$219,555,786, with 72% obtained through local sources, 28% state sources, and .3% federal sources. These revenue estimates do not take into account the \$28,000,000 Village ISD sends back to the state as a Chapter 41 district. Once this amount is subtracted, state supported funding drops to only 16.7% of revenues.

Payroll costs comprise approximately 71% of total expenditures with beginning teacher salaries in 2006 set at \$41,500 and a maximum teacher salary

rate of \$72,962. Other major funding expenditures include purchased services (22%), supplies and materials (3%), other operating costs (3%), and capital outlay (.3%)

Village ISD prides itself on providing every single child, regardless of the economic conditions of the neighborhood with a safe, clean, and modern learning facility. An assistant superintendent related an experience he had during a construction walk-through after conducting a major renovation of an older school facility:

We're walking through the library and doing a final walk-through with the contractor and a little, looked like about a second or third grade, kid sticks his head through a door and sees us and kind of jumps back in the hall and we walk out and say, "Hi", to him, and stuff. And he just looked up at me and said, "Mister, this is the most wonderful place I've ever been."

And when you can think about a little kid in the lower grades second or third grade that believes his school is the most wonderful place he's been, that kids got to have a better chance of succeeding. He's going to show up for school in the morning thinking, 'This is a good place to be. I want to do what I need to do here to be successful'.

That charged me up and still charges me up when I tell the story. If we can get a large number of our kids and make them believe that where they are is the most wonderful place they can be I think we'll have a better chance with them. And that's not just facilities obviously, if they walk in the front door and feel good about the place they're in, I think that does a lot for them.

With over \$476,000,000 invested in 47 facilities, Village ISD has regularly received voter approval to pass bond referendums used to finance new construction and facility improvements (Village ISD, Facts and Figures 2006-

2007). Bond ratings impact the ability of the district to negotiate financing on their bonds. According to Village ISD's 2006-2007 Facts & Figures brochure, Moody's Investor Services and Standards and Poor's have rated the district Aaa, the highest rating available.

### *District Academic Achievement Results*

School districts use a variety of metrics to determine progress and in the current climate of accountability, academic achievement results are closely scrutinized by federal, state, and regional educational agencies as well as by parents and other local stakeholders. State and federal funding as well as sanctions are directly tied to academic results. Indirectly, the academic strength of a school or district can have an economic impact on the area in which it is located if achievement scores fall and families move out of the area seeking a better education for their children. Businesses may also take into account the reputation and academic results of a school district before relocating or deciding to remain in an area. In addition to the State of Texas Accountability rating System, other achievement measures include: Texas Success Initiative/Higher Education Readiness Component, SAT/ACT scores, and Adequate Yearly Progress required by NCLB. A review of data in each of these areas is provided below.

### *Accountability Ratings*

Selection of Village ISD for this study was based on its earning a Recognized rating under the 2006 Texas Accountability System. For a

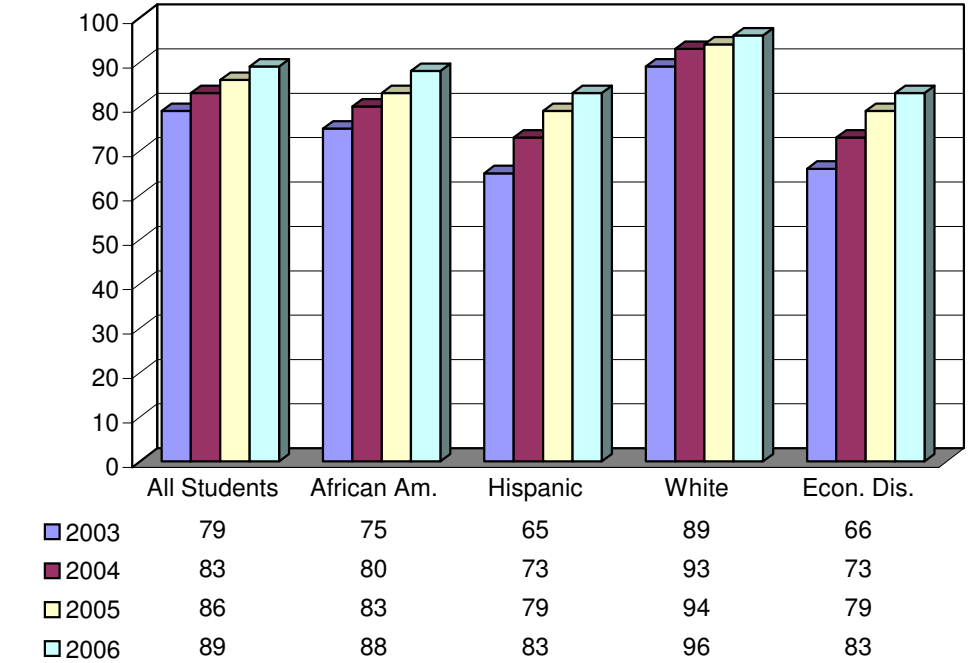
Recognized rating, districts must meet required standards on the following measures: Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), State-Developed Alternative Assessment (SDAA II), Completion Rate I, Annual Dropout Rate for Grades 7 and 8 for all students and in each student population group: African American, Hispanic, White, and Economically Disadvantaged. Under the 2006 Accountability Manual, districts were able to obtain a Recognized rating if they did not meet a required standard in one area, as long as they had demonstrated required improvement in that area. The 2006 standards for a Recognized rating required at least 70% passing rate by each population group, or 65% and required improvement; Completion Rate I of 85% standard or 80% standard plus required improvement; Dropout Rate of .7% standard or .9% and required improvement. The full requirements are listed in Appendix A. Longitudinal results for Village ISD on each of the four accountability rating measures are reported below.

*Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS).* The TAKS measures academic achievement in reading and math for grades 3-11, writing in grades 4 and 7, science in grades 5, 8, 10, and 11, and social studies in grades 8, 10, and 11. In 2006, the criteria for Recognized rating required results for all students as well as disaggregated scores for student population groups of African American, Hispanic, White, and Economically Disadvantaged to demonstrate at least 70% of the population had demonstrated proficiency on each subject test. An exception was allowed for districts in one subject area if it had achieved at least a 65%

passing rate for each population group and met the required improvement standard. While Village ISD has not yet eliminated achievement gaps between student population groups as measured by the TAKS, examination of longitudinal results supports that considerable progress has been made to increase achievement for all students.

Scores have steadily climbed for each population group and in each subject area over the past four years. Reading/English Language Arts results (Table 10) demonstrate that though substantial progress has been made for all population groups, achievement gaps continue between White students (96%) and all other groups in 2006. The most dramatic gains appear to be in the two groups with the greatest increase in population growth in the district: Hispanic students and students whose families meet eligibility as Economically Disadvantaged. Beginning with results in 2003, the lowest performing population group, Hispanic students had only 65% meeting proficient expectations. By 2006, 83% of Hispanic students had achieved at least a proficient result. Economically Disadvantaged students percent proficiency scores have moved from 66% in 2003 to 83% in 2006. Increasing reading proficiency and comprehension is a critical skill for both school success and life success given the number of careers that require the ability to read and analyze information.

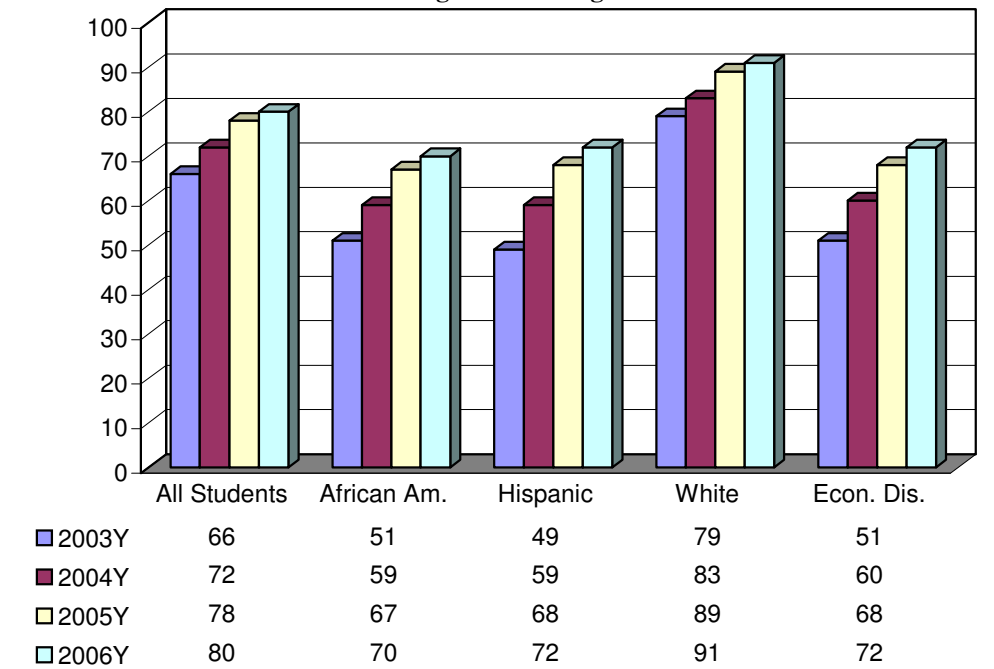
**Table 10 Reading/ELA Percent Passing TAKS Village ISD 2003 - 2006**





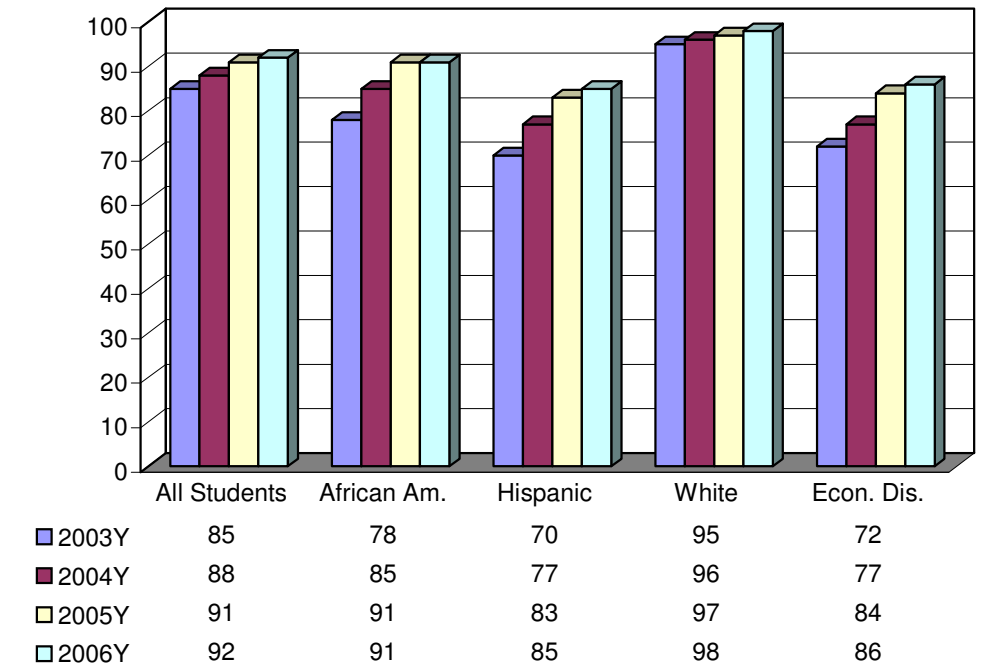
As with reading/English language arts results, proficiency measured by the TAKS Mathematics (Table 11) demonstrates steady growth across all population groups. In 2003, students in three population groups, African American, Hispanic, and Economically Disadvantaged had only about a 50% chance of passing the mathematics TAKS test. Four years later at least a 70% of the students in these population groups are meeting minimum proficiency standards. Though progress has been made in raising student achievement for all students, there is still work to be done in order for every population group to achieve the 90% or more proficiency currently reported for White students.

**Table 11 Mathematics Percent Passing TAKS Village ISD 2003 - 2006**



The smallest performance gaps between population groups are found in 2006 TAKS Writing results (Table 12). At least 90% of each population group achieved a proficient standard, putting Village ISD on par with Exemplary expectations in this one subject area test. This is an area that has shown strong improvements from the 2003 scores when three student groups, African American, Hispanic, and Economically Disadvantaged, had only 70-79% demonstrating proficiency on the writing exam.

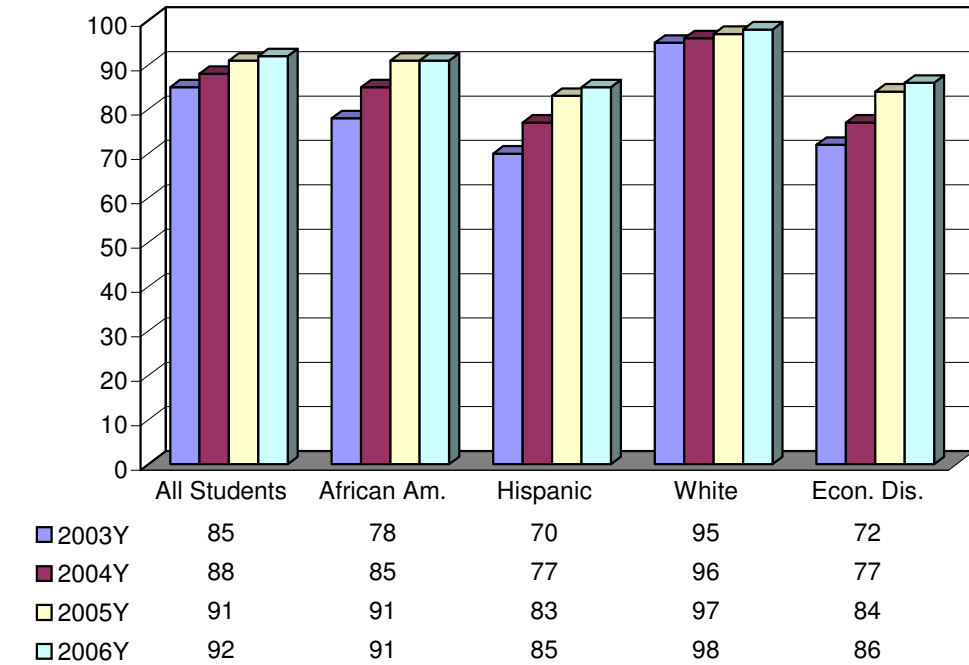
**Table 12 Writing Percent Passing TAKS Village ISD 2003 - 2006**



Scores for Social Studies follow a similar pattern (Table 13). While White student percent proficiency has been consistently higher than 90%, African American percentages have climbed from 78% to 91%, Hispanic scores have

increased from 70% to 85%, and Economically Disadvantaged percentages have risen from 72% to 86% in the past four years of testing.

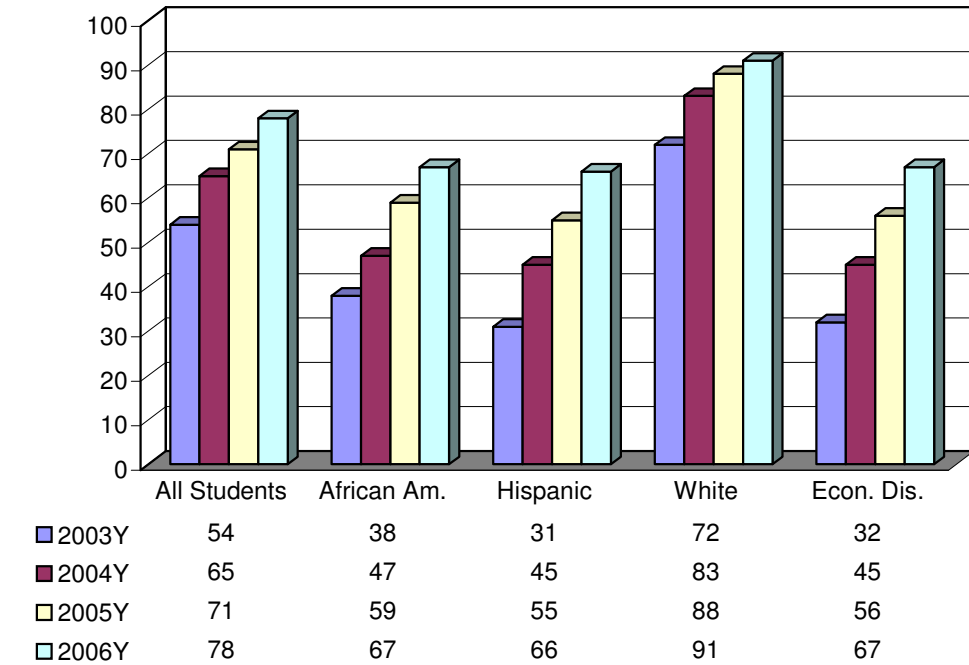
**Table 13 Social Studies Percent Passing TAKS Village ISD 2003 - 2006**



Science is an area that shows the need for the most growth in order to close achievement gaps and bring all student groups up to 90% or more demonstrating proficiency (Table 14). Percent proficiency for all students began at 54% in 2003 with startlingly low scores reported for African American (38%), Hispanic (31%) and Economically Disadvantaged (32%) students. While all population groups have experienced dramatic gains – including the more than doubling of Economically Disadvantaged students’ rates of proficiency from 32% to 67% - the scores for non White students, and those with economic challenges

still lag far behind the 91% proficiency gained by the White student population group in 2006.

**Table 14 Science Percent Passing TAKS Village ISD 2003 - 2006**



TAKS results from 2003 through 2006 illustrate the progress that Village ISD has made in closing achievement gaps. In writing, all population groups have demonstrated at least 90% proficiency; however, the comparison results also demonstrate that further work is needed to bring all student population groups up to at least 90% proficiency particularly in science and mathematics. Other indicators used to determine state of Texas Accountability ratings are results from

the SDAA II, Completion I Rates, and Dropout Rates for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Grade which are addressed below.

*State-Developed Alternative Assessment (SDAA II).* The State Developed Alternative Assessment (SDAA II) is an assessment designed for “special education students in grades 3-10 who are receiving instruction in the state’s curriculum but for whom the TAKS test is not an appropriate measure of their academic progress” (Texas Education Agency, 2006a, p. 24). Each year, an Assessment, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) committee reviews the goals, progress, and placement for students who qualify for special education services and also determines whether or not the student will take the TAKS test, the SDAA II, or another approved assessment. If the ARD committee determines an SDAA II is the most appropriate measure of a child’s progress, the committee must also decide what level to assess the student at. Results for SDAA II are reported on students designated to take the SDAA II who have met the ARD expectations on the level of assessment selected. In 2006, the standard for achieving a Recognized rating for SDAA II was set at 70% meeting ARD expectation. The SDAA II results from 2005 and 2006 for the State of Texas and Village ISD (Table 15) demonstrate that not only did Village ISD have at least 88% meet ARD expectation in all population groups, they also exceeded the state average reported for all students (84%). (Note: In 2007, SDAA II was phased out of the Texas Accountability System and replaced with other assessments).

**Table 15 SDAA II Percent Met ARD Expectations**

	<b>State All</b>	<b>Village All</b>	<b>African Am.</b>	<b>Hispanic</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Eco. Dis.</b>
<b>2006</b>	84	90	88	91	90	91
<b>2005</b>	79	89	88	89	91	89

*Completion Rate I.* For 2006 Accountability purposes, Texas adopted a model for determining high school completion rates based on the “percent of students who first attended ninth grade in the 2001-02 school year and have completed or are continuing their education four years later” (Texas Education Agency, 2006a, p. 19). This percentage does not include students who have earned a General Educational Development (GED). The accountability standard for a Recognized rating on Completion I rates in 2006 was set at 85%. Village ISD’s 2006 Completion I results (Table 16) met the Exemplary standard of 95%.

**Table 16 Percent of Completion I Rate (w/o GED) for State and Village ISD 2004 2005**

	<b>State All</b>	<b>Village All</b>	<b>African Am.</b>	<b>Hispanic</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Eco. Dis.</b>
<b>2005</b>	91.9	95.1	95.5	93.7	94.6	93.3
<b>2004</b>	91.9	92.8	92.6	89.8	96.5	90.5

*Annual Dropout Rate for Grades 7 and 8.* The final criteria used to determine the district Accountability rating is the Annual Dropout Rate for Grades 7 and 8. Results for Village ISD’s Annual Dropout Rate (Table 17) indicate the district exceeded the Recognized standard of .7% and met the Exemplary standard of .2% or less.

**Table 17 Annual Dropout Rate (Grades 7-8) for State and Village ISD 2004-05, 2003-04**

	<b>State All</b>	<b>Village All</b>	<b>African Am.</b>	<b>Hispanic</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Eco. Dis.</b>
<b>2004-05</b>	0.2	0	0	0.1	0.1	0.1
<b>2003-04</b>	0.2	0.1	0	0.1	0.1	0.1

As demonstrated in the preceding tables, Village ISD met or exceeded accountability standards for a Recognized rating in every area except science where the district met required improvement for three population groups: African American, Hispanic, and Economically Disadvantaged. While Accountability ratings have great importance, there are other achievement measures to consider when describing the results of Village ISD. These include the Texas Success Initiative, SAT, ACT, and Adequate Yearly progress results.

*Texas Success Initiative (TSI) Higher Education Readiness Component*

The Texas Success Initiative (TSI) Higher Education Readiness Component is not included in accountability ratings, and is a separate Gold Performance Acknowledgement that is calculated on 11<sup>th</sup> grade exit-level TAKS results in English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics. For ELA, The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board has determined that a scaled score of 2200 and at least a 3 on the exit-level essay meets the standard of college readiness. For math at least a scaled score of 2200 is required. Only schools and districts that are eligible for at least an Academically Acceptable rating are considered for this component. A further requirement for eligible schools and districts is that at least

50% of the students assessed on the 11<sup>th</sup> grade exit-level test must meet or exceed the TSI standard.

Progress toward achieving the district’s vision of “college ready without remediation” can be measured using the TSI scores each year. Percentages of students in each student group meeting the college readiness standard (Table 18) show that Village ISD did not earn a Gold Performance Acknowledgement on TSI in 2006. Only one student group, White students, met the standards for TSI in either 2005 or 2006. A comparison of scores reported for 2005 and 2006 indicate a general decrease in percentages of students in each population group meeting the required standards.

**Table 18 Texas Success Initiative - Higher Education Readiness Component State and Village ISD**

<b>Eng. LA</b>	<b>State All</b>	<b>Village All</b>	<b>African Am.</b>	<b>Hispanic</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Eco. Dis.</b>
<b>2006</b>	40	44	36	28	56	30
<b>2005</b>	39	47	28	30	59	30
<b>Mathematics</b>						
<b>2006</b>	51	56	31	39	70	40
<b>2005</b>	48	61	36	40	75	44

#### *SAT and ACT*

Other indicators of college readiness are the results of SAT and ACT College Board assessments. Unlike the compulsory TAKS test used for the TSI, the SAT and ACT are voluntary assessments. Students generally pay a fee to take these nationally norm referenced tests. Results are reported to the student, their



high school, and colleges that the student requests receive a report. While SAT and ACT have versions of their exams for younger students, the scores reported on the AEIS report are limited to graduating seniors. Furthermore, only districts and campuses that are rated at least Academically Acceptable, have 70% or more of their graduating seniors participating in SAT and/or ACT, and at least 40 of the tested students achieve a criterion score on at least one of the exams. The criterion scores are set at 1110 for the SAT and 24 on the ACT. Unlike other AEIS data, scores are not reported for Economically Disadvantaged students (Texas Education Agency, 2006a).

Mean SAT, ACT scores, and participation rates for Village ISD graduating seniors for 2005 (data reported in 2006) and 2004 are included below (Table 19). As can be seen in the data, a general downward trend of scores for both SAT and ACT occurred between 2004 and 2005, except for Hispanic students who showed an increase on mean SAT results. One of the initiatives mentioned by staff in Village ISD is to increase the percentage of students taking the SAT and ACT. The 2006 AEIS report shows an increase from 24% of Hispanic students participating in SAT/ACT testing in 2004 to 37% of Hispanic students participating in SAT/ACT testing in 2005. Percentages of African American students participating also increased; however there was a measured decrease in the percent of African American students meeting the criterion standards from 25.4% in 2004 to 11.5% in 2005. Village ISD administrators

realize that unless all students are adequately prepared for the rigorous content of the exams, scores will not increase. Initiatives the district has instituted to increase access to, and success in, advanced level courses will be discussed later in this chapter.

**Table 19 Mean SAT and ACT Scores, Percent Participation, At/Above Criterion State and Village ISD**

<b>Mean SAT</b>	<b>State All</b>	<b>Village All</b>	<b>African Am.</b>	<b>Hispanic</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Eco. Dis.</b>
<b>2005</b>	992	1057	907	987	1102	n/a
<b>2004</b>	987	1069	999	965	1096	n/a
<b>Mean ACT</b>						
<b>2005</b>	20.0	20.9	17.5	17.8	22.0	n/a
<b>2004</b>	20.1	22.0	22.2	19.7	22.3	n/a
<b>Percent Participation</b>						
<b>2005</b>	65.5	65.8	67.6	36.8	75.1	n/a
<b>2004</b>	61.9	61.2	57.8	24.8	71.2	n/a
<b>At or Above Criterion</b>						
<b>2005</b>	27.4	40.0	11.5	27.4	48.4	n/a
<b>2004</b>	27.0	43.5	25.4	16.3	50.0	n/a

*Adequate Yearly Progress – No Child Left Behind*

Village ISD met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) criteria as required by the NCLB in 2006. There are 22 indicators that comprise the full AYP rating system. AYP also uses academic achievement results in Reading/English Language Arts and Mathematics, but grade levels and student population groups are different. Graduation rates and/or attendance rates are also taken into consideration when determining AYP. An additional area addressed in AYP, concerns the percentage of students participating in state accountability testing.

According to the AYP District Data Table 2006, Village ISD had 99% or more students participating in all assessments and all student population groups including: African American, Hispanic, White, Economically Disadvantaged, Special Education, and Limited English Proficient.

### *Unique Educational Programs*

A description of Village ISD would not be complete without a brief outline of a few of the unique educational programs available to high school students. A variety of educational programs have been designed with the intention of better meeting individual needs— a departure from a one-size fits all philosophy. These include an alternative school of choice, academies, Advancement Via Individual Determination, and the recent addition of an Early College High School. All freshmen beginning with the 2006 school year have had the benefit of a Ninth Grade Initiative.

### *Alternative School of Choice*

In 1976, Village ISD opened an alternative learning center for students who needed credit recovery, and/or were in danger of dropping out. In the past thirty years, this alternative school of choice has been credited with keeping Village ISD dropout rates among the lowest in the state. An expanded facility has created space for 250-300 students. Students progress through a self-paced curriculum which allows entry into the program at any point during the year. This alternative school of choice demonstrates the long standing commitment that

Village ISD has made to matching learning to the individualized needs of students.

### *Academies*

Village ISD offers several academies to high school students. Some of the academies have pre-requisite academic enrollment criteria such as completion of Algebra as an 8<sup>th</sup> grade student. Other academies have open enrollment and accept any interested students without requiring academic achievement results of a specified standard or prior course completion. Located on high-needs campuses, the current academy offerings include: Academy of Bio-Medical Professions, Academy of Media Arts and Technology; International Business Academy; Law and Criminal Justice Academy; and Science and Engineering Pathways. In 2007-2008 the district plans to open an International Baccalaureate Program as well as a Math, Engineering, Technology, and Science Academy (METSA).

### *Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID)*

AVID is a nationally recognized program that has over twenty-five years of research to support increased percentages of AVID students attending and completing college. Village ISD began to offer AVID three years ago and currently the district provides AVID as an elective course at the two middle schools and high school with the largest numbers of low socioeconomic students. “Students selected for the program are individuals with academic potential, desire and determination, and meet at least one of the following criteria: first in the

family to attend college, historically underserved in four-year colleges, low income, or special circumstances” (Village ISD website, January, 2006). The AVID program encourages students to take advanced placement courses by providing needed support through structured study skill development such as note-taking, vocabulary building, and small group tutorial assistance. The percent of students in sixth through twelfth grade enrolled in pre-advanced placement or advanced placement courses has risen from 39.8% in 2005-2006 to 46.5% in 2006-2007 (Village ISD, PreAP/Advanced Placement Data, August 2007).

#### *Early College*

In 2006, Village ISD opened an Early College program enrolling about 100 ninth grade students. Students attend both high school and college courses in facilities located on a college campus earning college credit for many of the courses taken. This allows students to finish high school with up to two years of college course credit earned that can be applied to an associates degree or serve as the beginning of a four year degree program. Early College programs provide assistance to first generation and non-traditional college students, as well as an accelerated pathway for students with advanced knowledge and skills.

#### *Ninth Grade Initiative*

In an effort to discover ways to reduce the number of freshmen who fail high school courses, a year-long study was conducted by the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, high school principals, and teacher

leaders. This committee produced several recommendations and in 2006, Village ISD introduced a Ninth Grade Initiative based on these recommendations at all of its high schools. The initiative provides funding for lower student to teacher ratios than typical for high school courses. Experienced, innovative teachers were recruited to teach the ninth grade students. Many of these teachers had previously been assigned upper classman Advanced Placement courses. Ninth grade students who do not complete classroom assignments and/or homework by the end of the week are required to stay in a Friday after school study hall until released at 6:30 p.m. by administrators. The district is still gathering data on the outcomes from the first year of this program.

#### *Recent District Initiatives*

##### *Campus Support Teams*

Campuses that have not yet achieved at least Recognized status, and those where the principal is serving his or her first year as a principal in Village ISD, receive two scheduled Campus Support Team (CST) visits per year. The purpose of the CST is to model and provide guided practice to campus personnel in focused walkthroughs for instructional observation; processing observation feedback; data analysis methods; strategic planning; review of the Instructional Improvement Process; professional development plans; and determining what support the campus needs from central office.

The CST members include the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, the assistant superintendent that supervises the principal of the campus, the executive director for curriculum and professional development, central office curriculum and instruction support personnel, the campus principal, assistant principal(s), and teacher representatives from TAKS tested courses. The principal receives an agenda ahead of time in order to designate classrooms for observation, assign focused walkthrough teams, and gather any data and/or preparation of requested materials.

During the CST visit, walkthrough teams collaboratively observe classroom instruction using The Principles of Learning Model, debrief the observation, and prepare feedback that the principal shares later with the observed teacher. All CST members, district and campus, analyze data through a specifically outlined processes and develop SMART (strategic and specific, measurable, attainable, results-based, and time-bound) goals, and create action plans through quality management processes such as Fishbone Charts, Affinity Diagrams, and/or Tree Diagrams. The CST reviews campus developed Instructional Improvement Plans targeted toward identified Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills Student Expectations. Professional development plans are also examined for alignment to campus needs indicated by TAKS and district benchmark data. Finally, school staff members are encouraged to request

additional support from central office personnel to meet the identified needs of the campus.

While the CST only schedules two visits a year, all principals, even those whose campuses have achieved at least a Recognized rating, are expected to repeat the processes modeled during the CST with campus personnel on a regular basis. The CST performs accountability and monitoring functions but also serves as job-embedded professional development addressing both instructional leadership and building leadership capacity for the principal and other campus leaders, as well as for the teachers involved in the classroom observations.

#### *Content Literacy Strategies*

Four years ago, in response to low achievement results in reading, and the acknowledged need to prepare students for the rigors of college level coursework, the then new assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction introduced Village ISD to Content Literacy Strategies (CLS). These research-based methods have been selected to improve reading comprehension across subject areas, provide a systematic set of tools for analysis of text, as well as boost summarization skills. A district-level decision was made to deploy the strategies in all classrooms K-12 and building principals conducted professional development with every district teacher through modules developed by central office staff. The Content Literacy Strategies (CLS) deployed in Village ISD include: The Frayer Model 1 and 2; Zoom In Zoom Out, Concept Definition



Mapping, Visual/Verbal Word Association, Vocabulary Strategy (VOC), Combination Notes, 3-2-1 Send Off, Group Summarizing, and Rules-Based Summarizing. Teachers are expected to incorporate at least one CLS with students each week. Principals use walkthroughs and lesson plan reviews to ensure that CLS models have been included in instructional delivery.

*National Institute for School Leadership*

Village ISD has made a commitment to develop principals into strong instructional leaders through professional development targeted to deep knowledge about learning and teaching, and creating more effective campus teams leading to increased leadership capacity on each campus site. To assist in these efforts, two years ago, the district contracted with the National Institute for School Leadership (NISL) to conduct a trainer of trainers model with ongoing consulting support. Courses included in the NISL training include (National Center for Education and the Economy, 2007):

Phase 1

Course 1 World-Class Schooling: Vision and Goals

Unit 1 The Educational Challenge

Unit 2 The Principal as Strategic Thinker

Unit 3 Standards-Based Instructional Systems

Unit 4 The Principal as School Designer

Course 2 Focusing on Teaching and Learning

Unit 5 Foundations of Effective Learning

Unit 6 Leadership for Excellence in Literacy

Unit 7 Leadership for Excellence in Math

Unit 8 Promoting Professional Knowledge

Phase 2

Course 3 Developing Capacity and Commitment

Unit 9 The Principal as Instructional Leader

Unit 10 The Principal as Team Builder

Unit 11 The Principal as Ethical Leader

Course 4 Driving for Results

Unit 12 The Principal as Driver of Change

Unit 13 Leading for Results

Unit 14 Final Simulation and Reform Projects

An initial team of assistant superintendents, principals, and central office directors received about 19 days of professional development throughout the year with opportunities to practice new knowledge and skills with their staffs. This past year, the initial trainer of trainers team has been leading all campus principals through the same training. This next year, principals will be leading teachers through professional development incorporating NISL content and process skills.

*Technology*

As seen with Campus Support Teams, Content Literacy Strategies, and NISL training, Village ISD has sought multiple avenues to improve teaching, learning, and create efficient work systems. Due to the need to provide students, teachers, and district staff with access to valuable technology tools, Village ISD has invested financial and human development resources to expand technology applications and has introduced new technology systems through ongoing, job-embedded, professional development support. This professional development

support is delivered both on site, and through the district Technology Learning Center.

The district has developed an On-Line Curriculum (OLC). Teachers have access to the OLC from any internet capable port allowing them to develop lessons aligned with the TEKS and district expectations at school, home, or the local coffee shop. Village ISD is also able to track who uses the OLC and how often and principals are able to view lesson plans online to monitor alignment of planned learning experiences with district expectations. Electronic grade records also provide campus and district staff with instant access to daily academic progress of individual students.

As part of the first phase of a classroom technology initiative, all math and science classes have received Teacher Technology Carts that include a computer, LCD projector, document camera, DVD player, and handheld classroom response systems to electronically record, and instantly analyze individual student answers. These systems provide immediate feedback to both the student and the teacher on how well individuals understand and apply concepts.

#### *Summary of Chapter Four*

Though the findings of this research are not expected to generalize to other districts, a thick description of the context of the Village ISD has been provided to improve the transferability of this qualitative study.

For over 100 years, Village ISD has been educating students. The past several decades have brought tremendous changes to the district as housing, industry, and commercial properties replaced more than 50 square miles of farmland. The prosperity of the 1970's and 80's that welcomed so many new homeowners has given way to further economic changes as more affluent families head into outlying suburbs and families with greater financial needs join the school district and community.

The district's vision and mission proclaim a commitment to educating all students. Village ISD serves children from six different city communities, and in spite of recent controversies regarding immigration originating in one of the cities, the district board of education has maintained its focus on meeting the needs of the children of the district.

While academic results indicate continuing achievement gaps between student population groups in math and science, longitudinal data supports that the district has made progress in the past four years to improve achievement for all student groups and reduce achievement gaps in all subject areas.

The district provides several unique programs to address individual needs of students, particularly those at the high school level. District initiatives introduced in the past several years serve as evidence of the district's commitment to improve learning and teaching through targeted, ongoing, job-embedded professional development and increased access to technology support.

## Chapter 5: Research Findings

*So this is my 40th year in the business and I have heard changing demographics since 1966 and probably am ready to quit saying changing demographics and just say this is our society...The real question is has anyone ever learned from history and experience and how to do it and how not to do it.*

*Assistant Superintendent, Village ISD, 2007*

Achievement gaps between students of color and White students as well as between Economically Disadvantaged students and students who do not qualify for free and reduced lunch programs have continued despite legislation and mandates ordering elimination of achievement gaps at both the federal (U. S. Congress, 2001b) and state (Texas Education Agency, 2006d) level. These gaps exist whether examining college entrance and completion rates (Institute of Education Sciences, 2005) national or state SAT results, state academic assessment results, or state high school completion rates.

These intolerable achievement gaps have endured despite research identifying the elements present in schools and districts that have made progress in closing achievement gaps. Parallels between earlier educational frameworks: Effective Schools Correlates (R. Edmonds, 1979), Baldrige Quality Improvement Criteria (U. S. Congress, 1987), Stupski Foundation Components (Stupski Foundation, 2004), and Professional Learning Communities Characteristics (DuFour & Eaker, 1998) and recent research on districts that have made progress toward closing achievement gaps (Cawelti, 2001a; Green & Etheridge, 2001a;

Kim & Crasco, 2006; Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000; Snipes & Casserly, 2004; Stupski Foundation, 2005; Togneri & Anderson, 2003a) support the contention that educators have had access to what elements need to be in place for over forty years.

So what accounts for the continuing gaps in achievement? According to some business (Collins, 2001) and educational researchers (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Fullan, Bertani, & Quinn, 2004), there is a gap between knowing *what* to do and knowing *how* to do it, a phenomenon being referred to as *the knowing-doing gap* (Lovely, 2005). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to uncover *how* a Texas school district made progress in closing achievement gaps with all students.

The research questions this study has sought to answer include:

1. How did a school district in Texas make progress toward closing achievement gaps across all population groups as measured by the State Accountability System?
2. How did the district select which processes and/or strategies to employ in order to make progress toward closing student achievement gaps across all population groups?
3. How did the district implement the identified processes and/or strategies to make progress toward closing student achievement gaps across all population groups?

Data for the research was compiled from three sources: semi-structured interviews, direct observations, and review of documents resulting in 18 semi-structured individual interviews with the superintendent, four assistant superintendents, five central office directors, six principals, and two board members; direct observations of a district cabinet meeting, school board meeting, and principal professional development; and examination of district documents including achievement results, financial information, and school board meeting minutes. Data analysis was applied through Strauss and Corbin's three stages of coding: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Triangulation of all three data sources informed the findings (Mertens, 2005).

The following sections serve to explore the findings within the context of each research question. Each major process is defined with supporting information and underlying processes identified through the research. An additional finding, sustained and effective district leadership is not a process, but rather it is a condition of the district that has served as a driver for many of the processes identified through the research. As it appears to have been an essential component of the progress of the district, findings related to sustained, effective district leadership are included at the conclusion of this chapter.

*Question 1: How did a school district in Texas make progress toward closing achievement gaps across all population groups as measured by the State Accountability System?*

Village ISD has demonstrated progress toward closing achievement gaps as evidenced by the 2006 AEIS report and the Recognized rating the district received from the state of Texas. In describing the processes used by the district to achieve this progress a central office administrator explained, “Well, I can say I’ve been here a long time and I think that it wasn’t an accident or a single effort, a single program effort, or a single thrust”. Indeed, data gathered through this research supported four major processes which contributed to the overall progress in Village ISD. District staff: created systems to select, develop, and evaluate campus-level leaders, nurtured a culture of shared accountability, crafted systems of accountability, and built district structures to support learning and achievement.

These major processes are woven throughout the district and appear to impact multiple levels of the district’s organizational structure in areas as diverse as finance and facilities as well as curriculum, instruction, and assessment. As personnel accounts for approximately 85% of a district’s budget expenditures and its people impact every decision, support system, and classroom, it seems appropriate to begin a review of the findings by addressing how Village ISD has created systems to select, develop, and evaluate campus-level leaders.



*Created Systems to Select, Develop, and Evaluate Campus-Level Leaders*

In his research on businesses and organizations that have had break through success, Collins (2001) argues that it is more important to get the right people on the bus, and in the right seats, than it is to know where the bus is headed. It became clear through information shared by respondents during the interview process that Village ISD had studied Collins' book *Good to Great*. Several respondents referred to 'getting the right people on the bus' and 'getting the wrong people off the bus'. It also became clear through the data that the district has intentionally created systems for selection, development, and evaluation of principals and other campus leaders.

*Selection of Leaders.* School boards in Texas are responsible for hiring the superintendent and generally hold the superintendent responsible for selecting all other district personnel. Ten years ago, Village ISD selected the current superintendent. Two board members mentioned the board's specific desire to select a superintendent who matched the district's beliefs that all children would learn. As one board member offered, "the key there is the superintendent you pick. You pick a superintendent based on the goals you have for the district."

Another board member explained how the selection of the current superintendent has impacted the selection of other leaders in the district:

So she came in and because of her own experience elsewhere she was able, and has been able, to bring people into our district who have been tremendous assets. Many who have since retired but have left behind them

a legacy and those who succeeded them and carried on with the same enthusiasm. Some of them within our own district that were brought up through the system and who know the needs of the district and that is always wonderful.

The current superintendent is credited with bringing new people from outside the district, as well as recognizing talent and promoting leaders from within the district. The process Village ISD created to appoint principals includes screening of application materials, cover letters, and resumes to select a pool of candidates for further review. These selected candidates are invited to begin the interview process, which includes three stages of interviews: first with district leaders, later with campus members, and finally with the superintendent. The principal interview questions become more challenging as applicants move through the process. Village ISD district personnel interact with the candidate at least three times before a final selection decision to hire a principal is made. District leaders believe the multi-level process they developed has resulted in a greater knowledge about the particular skills and abilities of a candidate. An assistant superintendent acknowledged that while the process may seem laborious to the candidate, it serves an intended purpose:

I tell them well it's a thorough process and that's the way we do it. Because we're going to err on the side of being thorough. We don't take that decision as "Oh yeah, we've seen them one time and we're ready." So I think that really getting in to see them under a microscope several different times helps us judge a little bit better how effective they're going to be.

This knowledge of the candidate, combined with an intimate understanding of the needs of the campus, allows for a successful match to be made between principal candidates and available schools.

Village ISD recruits both assistant principals from within the district and outside hires to fill open principal positions. The Assistant Superintendent of Administration Personnel shared that approximately 80% of the district's principals have been hired from within Village ISD and 20% represent new hires to the district.

In addition to the previously described interview process, principal candidates selected from within the district have more frequent opportunities to demonstrate their skills and abilities. By having assistant superintendents directly involved in Campus Support Teams, principal evaluations, campus presentations, and delivery of professional development, district-level leaders have multiple opportunities to observe current Village ISD assistant principals, as well as teacher leaders in action. When it comes time to fill principal openings, dialogue occurs between the superintendent and assistant superintendents as to which assistant principals may be ready for consideration and which need further development. This ongoing search for leadership potential augments the districts succession planning. Assistant principals can then be targeted for additional professional development and/or leadership opportunities to better prepare them for a principalship.

*Development of Leaders.* Effective principal leaders are not born, but developed through a combination of planned professional learning experiences and on-the-job training. According to Cotton's review of studies on principals and student achievement, "decades of research have consistently found positive relationships between principal behavior and student academic achievement" (Cotton, 2003, p. 1). But how do principals learn the necessary knowledge and skills to positively impact student achievement, especially those who may be new to the principalship? In Village ISD, this planned professional development is not left to chance. An assistant superintendent shared, "...no one is perfect when they come out of there. So it's our job to help develop them and help them be successful." Soon after hiring selections are made, Village ISD district leaders shift the focus from finding an effective principal to developing an effective instructional leader.

Principals interviewed consistently mentioned the professional development provided to them as one of the primary reasons for the progress made in closing achievement gaps. District-level professional development for principals focuses on instructional leadership, and expanding leadership capacity through building effective teams. These learning opportunities are not limited to principals alone, assistant principals are often included. This provides an even wider pool of potential school leaders who have been exposed to the same

professional learning experiences required of campus leaders. A secondary principal expressed support for this practice:

I think our district does an outstanding job of allowing the assistant principals to attend the principals' meetings and to be a part of NISL. And also to be principal of summer school which I think will really assist them in their leadership.

*Evaluation of Leaders.* Evaluation and feedback are an integral part of learning and school principals most continuously learn how to improve their leadership. Effective evaluations are designed to measure desired behaviors against an agreed upon standard (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). The district's commitment to continuous improvement is reflected in both the development and use of a district principal/assistant principal evaluation tool. The assistant superintendents collaborated to develop, and later refine, this evaluation instrument to reflect the district's expectation that principals be skilled instructional leaders and adept at building leadership capacity.

The instrument format includes Performance Domains in the areas of: instructional management; school morale; school improvement; personnel improvement management of fiscal, administrative, and facilities functions; student management; professional growth and development; school/community relations; and student performance. Each Performance Domain includes three to seven descriptive Criteria. Principals receive one of three ratings on each criterion: M/E, meets or exceeds district expectations; WIP, work in progress; or

DNM, does not meet district expectations. The following excerpt from the Village ISD Principal/Assistant Principal Evaluation document provides an example of the instructional management performance domain and criteria:

**Instructional Management:**

Provides instructional resources and materials to support teaching staff in accomplishing instructional goals;

Understands and communicates the VISD curricular design standards and monitors for delivery;

Uses feedback for instructional improvement and understanding of the VISD assessment standards;

Understands, communicates, and monitors the VISD instructional standards;

Works with special population students.

Completion of the evaluation instrument takes place over the course of the year.

Principals complete a self-assessment and discuss ongoing progress with their assigned evaluator who then completes and submits an annual summative evaluation.

Approximately twelve principals are assigned to each assistant superintendent for evaluation purposes with the remaining principals assigned to the superintendent. A purposeful decision is made regarding which principals are assigned to which evaluator. Principals whose campuses have yet to achieve at least a Recognized rating are generally assigned to the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction. Principals needing more support in personnel or

campus processes may be assigned to the Assistant Superintendent of Administration Personnel, etc.

The principal's evaluator conducts at least two on-campus meetings with the principal each year which include campus and classroom observations. The evaluator will also participate in Campus Support Team visits. All of the information gained through contact with the principal is then included as part of the evaluation. An assistant superintendent described the development of the evaluation instrument as well its intended use:

So we have research about our instrument that we restructured and we have a whole lot more specificity on it and we have a lot more about instruction on it. We also designed it so that it's truly a more reflective instrument so that it's not, "I did this. Or I didn't do this." It's, "I met expectations. I did not meet expectations. Or this is a work in progress for me." And we don't penalize people for assessing it as a work in progress. Because we want them to think through what area of this do I need to improve and what needs to be written on my professional development plan?

The district's commitment to professional learning is evidenced in district leadership's assertion that principals are expected to be "a work in progress" and that there is no penalty for admitting that there are areas that need further development. Rather than empty rhetoric, principals interviewed confirmed that they feel support in admitting mistakes as well as identifying areas for personal growth. This is further illustrated in a secondary principal's comment about the assistant superintendent who serves as his evaluator:

You know when it comes time to get feedback from her you're going to get honest feedback -- but that's okay. And when she asks you what are your reflections, it's okay to say, "Here, here, here, here, here, here, here is where I need to get better" and be very honest and upfront about that. And not soft-pedal it or try to make yourself -- because you know she knows. And you might as well be honest about it and reflect with her and then she makes you feel better for having good self perceptive skills and then you work together to improve.

The final sentence of this quote leads into another process cited by respondents for the district's progress, the development of a culture where people accept accountability for results and work collaboratively to improve outcomes.

#### *Nurtured a Culture of Shared Accountability*

Culture is essentially, 'the way we do things around here' and as such, an organization's culture impacts the actions and beliefs of people at every level of the organization (Deal & Peterson, 1999). Developing both a collective moral purpose and a demanding culture are two of the ten lessons for district-wide reform identified by Fullan et al (2004, p. 43):

collective moral purpose makes explicit the goal of raising the bar and closing the gap for all individuals and schools...district leaders must foster a culture in which school principals are concerned about the success of every school in the district, not just their own.

But how does a district create this culture of shared accountability for results?

Data revealed the presence of the following elements and processes related to a culture of shared accountability: prior reputation and history of innovation; articulated a shared vision supported by passion, and commitment; required focused dialogue, communication, and collaboration; actively pursued



relationship building; demonstrated care and compassion for individuals; and embodied a commitment to continuous improvement.

*Prior Reputation and History of Innovation.* Village ISD has long been identified as a leading district in the state. A central office respondent shared this story from the 1990's of how other educational leaders in a city 240 miles away responded when she told them she had been offered an assistant principal position in Village ISD:

when I told my colleagues, and the other individuals who were also going through mid-management, you know all I had to say was I got a position in [Village ISD] and they immediately knew the district. That district had had such a positive name across the state for so long that they just said, "oh my gosh you are so fortunate to be going to such a great district".

This sense of pride accompanied other respondent comments about the district's long standing commitment to professional development, cutting edge instructional practices, allocation of financial resources to attract and retain the best teachers, and early innovations in the areas of curriculum development, and technology usage. One central office administrator who has served the district for over twenty years reported:

We have had a long history of having well-developed curriculum. We were one of the -- we may have been the first -- to have a printed elementary curriculum. That was in 1980. And the reason I think that if it wasn't the first it was among the first is because we had lots of districts buying it from us.

This same respondent shared how a previous superintendent, who served the district during the 1980's, made a commitment to fill principal positions with

central office curriculum directors who could bring a district-wide perspective as well as instructional leadership to the school sites. The principals selected during this period of time continued to serve the district for many years. Though most have since retired, this historical expectation that principals function as instructional leaders has continued to influence hiring and promotion practices.

*Articulated a Shared Vision Supported by Passion and Commitment.* The importance of a shared vision as well as deep commitment to achieving that vision has been identified by educational researchers as a key to successful school (Cotton, 2003) and district reform (Fullan, Bertani, & Quinn, 2004). But how does a district instill a commitment to a vision? In Village ISD this has been accomplished through purposeful, consistent articulation of the vision supported with the passion and commitment of the superintendent and other district and campus leaders.

An assistant superintendent shared:

In my opinion I think it all starts with our superintendent. She certainly is a visionary leader and she has a vision that all students - all meaning all - will achieve at high levels. Her passion, which has become the organization's passion, is for all students to leave our institution prepared for college and be able to receive postsecondary education in a way that will guarantee that they will have a high quality of life.

Another assistant superintendent gave an example of the superintendent's consistent communication of the vision:

And all of us have the basic belief that regardless of background - that can't be an excuse or whatever because there are too many exceptions. I

think Edmonds said it best, 'how many districts do I have to show you that are successful before you believe everyone can be successful?' And so we all believe it.

The difference with [the superintendent] is that she not only believes it she preaches it and makes sure she says it often. Probably more than most people and I think it's her style and she also realizes it makes a difference. Many of us say it once and assume since we said it once everyone knows it. Everyone believes it. I told you I loved you 10 years ago I don't need to tell you again type of thing. But [superintendent] realizes that you need to keep making the message obvious and saying it over and over. Not only because your audience changes, but if you don't say it over and over there can be some misunderstanding that the commitment has lessened.

Village ISD has a vision that is not only shared widely but is also measurable. The vision in Village ISD travels deeper and farther than just the administrators of central office. All eighteen people interviewed were cognizant of the district's vision and gave multiple examples of how the passion and commitment of the district's people brings the vision to life. As one board member explained:

We as a district are blessed with a board that has a pretty similar focus. And our focus is to educate kids. Every kid that walks into our door we want to educate that kid. We want to challenge that child and we want to push them to be as good as they can be. And we believe that they can all learn.

Part of the process to deploy the vision has been an intentional effort to communicate the vision often with all stakeholders. The district has established communication pathways not only to disseminate information, but also to receive input.

*Required Focused Dialogue, Communication, and Collaboration.*

Developing a collaborative culture is essential to building a professional learning community “whose members work interdependently to achieve common goals” (Eaker, DuFour, & Burnette, 2002, p. 11). While the superintendent has been credited with active communication of the vision, multiple avenues of communication and focused dialogue provide the pathways needed to build a culture of collaboration and shared accountability. Though the majority of decisions related to achieving the vision appear to be made at the district-level, these decisions are not made in isolation. Carefully crafted agendas ensure that focused dialogue occurs through input sought from teachers and principals in regularly scheduled meetings with central office staff. This required focused dialogue centers on student achievement, data analysis, teaching practices, and ways to improve learning for all students. Scheduled meetings combined with the ongoing presence of assistant superintendents during principal evaluation meetings, Campus Support Team visits, and yearly staff forums provide opportunities for increased communication and collaboration between campus and district staff. These frequent, required interactions break down barriers that could lead to isolation. Principals interviewed confirmed the ease of access to central office personnel. As one secondary principal put it:

The greatest thing is there is not a buffer. They have not established a buffer zone and I say that in a way that’s positive – meaning that if I need [Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction] I get [Assistant

Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction]. If I need [Superintendent] I get [Superintendent]. If I need [Assistant Superintendent for Personnel] – any of the administrators are there at my fingertips.

*Cultivated Strong Trust in Leadership.* Trust in leadership supports a culture of shared accountability. In successful school organizations, a pervasive sense of trust exists among the principals and district-level staff for each other as well as for the superintendent and school board members. Trust can be a tenuous concept and must be constantly cultivated and maintained.

Trust is ethereal and you can never take it for granted...The problem is, no matter how long you are trusted and no matter how high the trust level is, if you drop your guard and betray people's trust just once, the level of trust will plunge to zero and stay there for a time. (Schumaker & Sommers, 2001, p. 23):

So how does district leadership maintain a climate of trust with its employees, particularly when thousands of individuals are involved? In Village ISD, from the superintendent as well as her leadership team, principals and central office staff receive a mixture of both pressure and support in a climate where people can admit mistakes and weaknesses and ask for help. In an environment of high expectations - that all students will learn and that no excuses are accepted – simultaneous pressure and support creates a balancing act. One of the area superintendents explained the superintendent's skill at maintaining both pressure and support as:

The right knack or ability to appropriately bring pressure where pressure is needed and at the same time not threaten people is an incredible skill.

Looking at it from an athletic orientation, sometimes coaches have to yell and scream and jump up and down, but the players can't be afraid to still go and run the play.

Another assistant superintendent included that the superintendent not only checks on results and progress, but she also provides necessary resources:

and this is the unique part -- she holds your feet to the fire but at the same time doesn't burn you. She expects you to get results. She checks on your results. She gives you a certain amount of latitude if you are getting results. But there's not a tension. There's not the hammer over your head to get results. And then she provides you with the resources.

In order to nurture a culture of shared accountability, trust in leadership must run deeper than the superintendent. Principals feel they can ask for support from central office leaders as well as from other principals. An elementary principal shared:

We're not afraid of telling somebody I don't know how to do this. Can you help me? What are you doing? I'm looking at your scores and in fourth grade writing what are you doing to get higher percentages of fours in composition? And that's what we do a lot of dialogue and being supported to be risk-takers and to continue to be in a learning mode.

The district backs up its high expectations for results with district required actions to achieve results. Teachers who must buy into this culture of shared accountability also need to trust in leadership. While teachers were not included as respondents in this study, a central office staff member credited trust in leadership for the success of the Campus Support Team structure:

Word gets around rather quickly they truly are here to help. Nobody's coming in to tell you that you're doing something wrong. And it's really been a good conversation that's gone on at the table.

*Actively Pursued Relationship Building.* Relationship building is a process that takes into account individual needs as well as collective needs. In *Breaking Ranks II* (National Association of Secondary Principals, 2004) the authors propose that high schools personalize their environments to improve student achievement and recommend that school leaders build, “structural and behavioral models to strengthen relationships among people – students, teachers, staff members, families, and the larger community” (p. 66). The recommendation is to build relationships at all levels – not just the student level. District leaders in Village ISD have taken this a step further and have actively pursued relationships between the district and the wider community as well as between district-level staff and campus staff.

Respondents explained that the development of relationships, particularly with community partners is an act of intention. To assure that the district gives back to the community, the superintendent, assistant superintendents, central office directors, and campus principals join local service and business organizations. District leadership has an expectation that the Village ISD staff representative will assume an officer level role in the community organization that he or she joins and eventually serve as the chair or president. The Assistant Superintendent for Student, Family, and Community services matches Village ISD staff members to the various community organizations to be certain that representation is maintained. These relationships with local organizations provide

for regular contact between Village ISD staff and the broader community creating additional avenues for communication and mutual understanding.

Within the district, Village ISD's culture of shared accountability includes relationship building that has led to a sense of togetherness. The organization understands that no one person or department can create the structures needed for success. As one assistant superintendent explained:

We acknowledge that this is hard work. This is complex work and we acknowledge that there has to be a synergy about the work that there is no one person, no one school, no one department, no one division that could do this.

Relationship building is not left to chance. In addition to regular contact with principals, the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction meets two to three times a year with teacher leaders:

It is huge to help guide the work. And I feel like I have to have relationships there. If I don't have a relationship it gets filtered several ways. I am really big on face-to-face. And I need to have some *go-to* teachers in this district that I can say, "tell me how people really feel?" They have high credibility with me and they can tell me. I just - I have to have it and I think it's an important thing to do.

As a result of the relationship between teacher leaders and the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, central office staff became aware of the tension between what middle school and high school teachers were being asked to accomplish and what they thought they could be expected to do. In response to this concern, the district has increased the time, training, and resources available to secondary teachers through a professional development



period at all secondary schools. The relationship with teacher leaders cultivated by central office staff has resulted in a tangible benefit to both the teacher leaders and other secondary teachers.

There are numerous other examples of relationship building between the district and campus levels. Central office members involved in personnel decisions maintain regular contact with the principals they serve:

It's almost as if we're connected at the hip. Especially this time of year when we're trying to hire for the campuses. Very close contact with them. And I realized real soon when I came on board ten years ago that I was going to have to learn how to get along with all of them.

At the campus-level, a secondary principal serving over 2600 students makes an effort to stay in contact with over 200 staff members through frequent one on one contact and worries if he doesn't see someone for a day or two, "Every morning I do a 40 minute walk and two administrators go with me so we can go by each teacher and say good morning and hello".

Through these interactions between central office and campus leadership, as well as campus leadership and school staff, a sense of shared accountability develops. When asked, who is accountable for results, the invariable answer was, "we all are". Respondents expressed an ownership of results as well as camaraderie for other members in the organization. A frequently mentioned phrase was, "we have fun here". Respondents expressed being serious about the

work, but also commented on enjoying a playful relationship with other leaders in the district.

*Demonstrated Care and Compassion for Individuals.* An extension of the relationship building that supports a culture of shared accountability is the district's commitment to the people in the organization and in their commitment to each other. "I think the reason we are successful is that we like and trust each other," explained a central office employee. While the district has developed a vision to impact all children, it has not lost sight of the fact that each student, each staff member, and each family has value and importance. Individuals are driven to work for the common good, as well as to do what is right for the individuals in their care. By committing to each person, respondents shared that the whole organization has been positively impacted.

*Embodied a Commitment to Continuous Improvement.* The final component of how the district nurtured a culture of shared accountability lies in dissatisfaction with current reality and a commitment to seek new ways to solve problems. Senge refers to this as creative tension, "the tension between vision and reality" (1990, p. 226). While respondents acknowledged the progress the district has made toward realizing the vision, no one expressed total satisfaction for the current results. This attitude of not being good enough yet pushes individuals to achieve more. A secondary principal stressed:

This is more than a job. This is a calling. It takes a special person to be in education because it is a tough job and with the standards of No Child Left Behind it is even tougher now. And people aren't backing out they are stepping up to the plate. And they are saying it doesn't matter what you throw at us we will rise to the level of your expectations and we will deliver a quality product. And that is what is so impressive about this district. That passion has just infiltrated *Village ISD*. So that's what's the best to me.

A culture of shared accountability must be more than words. For the culture to be truly pervasive throughout an organization there should be tangible evidence that it exists. One elementary principal illustrated how a culture of shared accountability looks on his campus:

I saw some of my teams start sharing students. "Now hey, I do this better than you do let me take these kids that are struggling and I'll work with them." So when they started doing structures of not just sharing lesson plans, but sharing those challenging students and coming up with some creative ways, that was good.

How a district nurtures a culture of shared accountability will vary depending on the context of the district, but data gathered on Village ISD suggests the district's culture has been developed from a starting point of historical innovation: ongoing transmission of vision, passion, and commitment; strengthened through required dialogue, communication and collaboration focused on student achievement, data analysis, teaching and learning; active relationship building; care and compassion for individuals; and a commitment to continuous improvement. While a culture of shared accountability is vital, systems need to be designed to support the culture (Deal & Peterson, 1999).

### *Crafted Systems of Accountability*

Having a culture of shared accountability is essential to district success, but culture alone without supporting systems will not produce desired results. A system of accountability must also be developed, which includes what will be measured, what is the standard of success, who will be responsible for measuring and reporting results, how often will results be evaluated, and how will results be disseminated. How did Village ISD craft district systems of accountability?

Woven throughout the cultural pieces of Village ISD is a general emphasis on accountability that is supported by clearly articulated expectations, stated non-negotiables with consistent monitoring, frequent examination of outcomes, and development of both individual and shared accountability for results.

*Clearly Articulated Expectations.* In order to meet a standard, expectations must be clearly articulated and fully understood by those involved in meeting the standard. Effective leaders possess the ability to clarify roles and expectations (Yukl, 2006). Village ISD district leadership clarified expectations in two distinct arenas: one related to vision and the other to daily operations. District expectations viewed through the vision that all students will graduate college ready without remediation, is articulated by an elementary principal:

A lot of this has to do with expectations. You know a teacher in a classroom that has high expectations for the children usually will get better results than a teacher with lower expectations. And I think that expectation level that I have seen just kind of permeates throughout the district. That there is just an expectation that, well these kids are going to

be successful – I don't care if they're poor – I don't care if they don't speak English at home – they're going to learn. There is no reason why these kids can't be just as successful as everybody else. We just have to be better at it. I think it's just that.

While the previous example of high expectations concerns the culture of Village ISD, expectations about the accountability systems developed by the district to achieve the vision are also present. Here a secondary principal explains how district expectations are translated to the classroom:

I think they are clearly articulated from our superintendent to our assistant superintendents. It is mentioned every time we get together. So we hear it. We see it because documentation is given to us. And we in turn take those expectations and give them to our teachers so everyone is on the same page and that is where the teamwork and the family comes in because everyone knows what the expectation is.

In the accountability systems crafted in Village ISD, expectations for performance are made explicit through stated objectives and written expectations which serve as non-negotiables. Each of these expectations helps to create district cohesion and alignment of systems. Examples include specific outlines for Campus Support Team visits, written expectations for the use of the secondary professional development period, instructional metrics included in the principal evaluation, delivery of district-level professional development through district-developed and distributed modules, provision of an online curriculum with an expectation that teachers use the curriculum provided.

*Consistent Monitoring.* Monitoring is an action of reviewing compliance with expected processes and practices. In order to be effective, monitoring must

occur consistently enough to provide ongoing information on progress toward the implementation of desired practices. Related to explicit expectations and stated non-negotiables, the district has created a system of consistent monitoring. “Clear, simple goals don’t mean much if nobody takes them seriously. The failure to follow through is widespread in business, and a major cause of poor execution” (Bossidy & Charan, 2002). In Village ISD, one monitoring system is the Campus Support Team visits which anchor the district’s expectations that each child receives quality teaching and learning. These scheduled visits include classroom observations conducted by district personnel and campus leaders and teachers from the school site.

An assistant superintendent emphasized:

And we really believe in monitoring what we ask teachers to teach. When we do staff development we don’t just do staff development and say see you back in August we hope you implement it. The expectation is this is what we want implemented and we will be monitoring it.

Campus Support Teams are deployed with district staff for campuses with principals who are new to Village ISD and those campuses that have yet to achieve at least a Recognized rating. All campus principals are expected to conduct a similar team classroom observation and feedback format regularly with their instructional staff.

In order to ensure students receive quality instruction, principals directly monitor classroom practices as well as lesson planning documents. A secondary

principal explained how he monitors teachers' implementation of district professional development, "I just made it very clear that when I'm looking at your lesson plans among other things, you know the non-negotiables that I'm looking for are Content Literacy Strategies". This combination of clear expectations with consistent monitoring signals principals that district leadership is serious about implementation and follow through on district developed systems and processes. These same district expectations are then transmitted by principals to the teachers working in direct contact with students.

*Frequent Examination of Outcomes.* While consistent monitoring of classroom instruction will confirm whether or not teachers are using specific strategies, monitoring needs to be combined with measured outcomes to determine effectiveness of practice and progress toward achieving established standards (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). In Village ISD, district accountability systems provide access to relevant data which includes TAKS results, failure rates, attendance data, and benchmark results. Data management systems provided by the district allow principals and teachers instant access to daily grades and achievement results. The data can be viewed by grade level, subject area, teacher, individual class, or individual student results. An elementary principal emphasized, "We look at data constantly". Statements about the usage of data were echoed by each of the six principal respondents, and every other respondent included in the study.

Merely looking at data is one thing, actually using data to drive decisions that impact teaching and learning is quite another. A secondary principal explained the data driven dialogue resulting from Campus Support Team visits:

They'll bring over an assistant superintendent which will be [curriculum and instruction] and [the director of curriculum and instruction] will come over and the coordinators from the core classes. We'll come in and we'll bring our leadership team in as well and we will really look at data. And we'll have some serious dialogue about where are we struggling? What do we need to do? How are we doing that?

These data driven conversations do more than just raise questions, a central office director clarified, "When they start looking at data in different ways, when they start talking through strategies and things like that they walk away with, 'lets try it this way. I hadn't thought of that before'".

A secondary principal noted changes in the quality of the use of data to impact learning and teaching as well:

And I really have seen a more serious, scholarly approach, academic approach to knowing about the science and craft of teaching and learning and how kids learn and what strategies help them learn best. And wanting to have some sort of documentation and wanting to have some sort of data that backs up what we do.

Finally, as a board member stated:

We talk about the vision and the fact that we are delivering against the vision -- another key is measurement. You have to measure to make sure that you're headed in the right direction and to make those critical course adjustments as you go along if you're not getting where you want to be.

Student achievement is not the only area scrutinized for results. Village ISD conducts yearly customer satisfaction surveys with campus staff and families.



Every other year, a random sample phone survey is also completed. Results are shared within two weeks of survey completion to give principals and campus improvement teams real time access to the feedback. In areas where metrics are not readily available, such as in the human resources department, district staff members have begun to explore the use of *Balanced Score Cards*.

The Balanced Score Card process requires the organization be viewed through four perspectives: learning and growth; business process; customer; and financial perspective. Through the *Balanced Score Card* management system, the organization develops metrics, data collection, and analysis aligned to each perspective. This process, “enables organizations to clarify their vision and strategy and translate them into action” (Arveson, 1998). Through the *Balanced Score Card* process, district-level departments have created measurable goals and will systematically review results to determine progress on achieving these departmental goals.

*Development of Individual and Shared Accountability for Results.* The final piece needed to craft effective accountability systems rests in the development of who is held accountable for results. Accountability for results must extend beyond the mere assignment of responsibility. Individuals and groups must hold themselves accountable for results. Effective school reform requires that superintendents, principals, and teachers accept both individual and shared responsibility for results (Schlechty, 2002). The processes of examining results

and basing decisions on individual and group achievement further support Village ISD's accountability systems. Respondents, regardless of role, each shared that he or she was personally accountable for results. Those interviewed also provided numerous examples of district and campus personnel supporting one another in joint efforts to improve achievement such as a central office director's explanation of the Campus Support Teams:

It is a joint effort with the campus and district and all that kind of stuff. And that's been a great process. But I think a side benefit that has occurred as a result of starting those campus improvement teams has been that it has opened up the conversations to the point that campuses know that there is going to be a conversation at any time about data, about strategies, and about the things that are contributing positively or negatively to their getting achievement levels that they're getting. It's really made that whole relationship a lot more transparent so to speak. So that there is a comfort for level with us being involved in the conversation at the campus-level.

In addition to the alliances forged between district-level and campus-level leadership, there is also a culture of shared accountability across schools and between principals. A secondary principal explained, "There is a strong accountability piece. A strong sense of group accountability with the principals and everybody seems to be really pushing their teachers to implement these instructional practices that we know are going to be effective". Principals at all three levels interviewed discussed the interactions and support from other principals as well as from central office.

In Village ISD, crafting systems of accountability required several underlying processes: articulating clear expectations, consistent monitoring,

frequent examination of outcomes, and development of both individual and shared accountability for results. These systems of accountability directly support, and are supported by the culture of shared accountability nurtured in Village ISD.

*Built District Structures to Support Learning and Achievement*

In order for wide-spread organizational change to take place, districts must provide structures to support learning and achievement. Structural support such as scheduling for team planning time and collaborative professional dialogue impact whether or not teachers engage in the social interactions necessary to build communication and trust. In settings where both a culture of positive collegiality and the systems to support teacher time and staff continuity are present, staff develop the necessary social capital to encourage teachers to take the risk of adopting new practices (Useem, Christman, Gold, & Simon, 1997).

Village ISD has built and maintained district structures to support learning and achievement on each campus. These structures can be described as the way the district does business and are deeply related to the culture of shared accountability. The data supports that these structures are the result of two related underlying processes: alignment of district resources to the vision and goals; and dispersal of district support and resources differentiated by need for students, staff, campuses, and families.

*Alignment of District Resources to the Vision and Goals.* District resources include revenue such as state allocations, local property taxes, and bond

levies. Other resources related to funding are material and human resources. An additional area often overlooked as a resource is time and the way that time is utilized. While districts of similar size and economic base may have access to comparable resources, how these resources are allocated may vary dramatically from district to district. Aligning finite district resources to the vision and goals requires strategic decision making.

In Village ISD, respondents consistently referred to an alignment of district resources to support both the vision and goals. Examples included the allocation of funding to directly improve instruction such as professional development devised and deployed by the district, district funding and staff allocations to support an additional professional development period to all secondary teachers, Campus Support Teams, and an online curriculum.

A prevailing concept shared by respondents included district personnel serving as campus resources. District-level curriculum specialists and technology trainers serve campus-level needs. Central office respondents and principals at every level described how district departments provide direct support to principals thus freeing principals up to spend more time in classrooms. As an elementary principal put it, “the support that principals receive from central staff, from trainers, and from content curriculum specialists is very unique”.

Examples of central office staff directly serving principals included: providing research on programs principals had requested to implement; checking

references and communicating with all new hires; and providing updated information on identified students to assist in determining appropriate interventions. Here a central office executive director explains her role in supporting the work of principals:

So that helps the campus principal to know when I send them the data and say these are the kids that are newcomers for you to serve and these are the kids who have been here eight years -- they need intensive [help] for passing the TAKS. They must pass the TAKS. They've been here 8-9 years. So all that data helps the principals... I think I see it as it's my responsibility to help you. When you are the principal you've got bilingual ESL, GT, special ed, 504, PTA, the math department, the science department. You don't have the time to be trying to figure out what bilingual ESL wants. So I'm going to make it easy for you because now with No Child Left Behind they are going to look at all of these kids.

Other central office structures that support learning and achievement include just-in-time services to teachers, particularly new teachers, needing additional instructional delivery support. Principals described easy access to district-provided curriculum specialists who would come to campus to model lessons, coach, and assist with lesson design. A secondary principal credited the work of these central office specialists in helping to maintain a campus recognized rating by providing weekly support to five new math teachers on his campus in 2006-07:

With so many [new math teachers] we needed to get in there quickly at the beginning of the year and to really start those teachers out on the right foot. So we had access to [district curriculum specialists]. Very helpful. Very supportive.

Having district structures that direct district resources to the goals of learning and achievement is further supported by the district's distribution of resources based on need.

*Dispersal of District Support and Resources Differentiated by Need.* The previous section provided examples of how Village ISD resources have been aligned to the district's vision and goals. How resources are allocated is related to who receives resources and why. With a finite pool of resources available, a district must determine how to distribute these resources. Should the district employ an equality model, with each member receiving equal amounts of resources, or an equity model that channels resources based on identified needs? Village ISD has chosen the latter model. While there is an explicit expectation that all campuses will deploy non-negotiable district-developed practices, Village ISD has made a commitment to provide levels of service based on need that extend beyond the baseline requirements and support given to all campuses. This commitment to differentiation by need is transmitted throughout the layers of the district: campuses, principals, staff, students, and even families receive support based on need rather than on fair shares for all.

Campus differentiation by need includes both additional funding and human resources. A secondary principal of a Title I school described differentiation in staffing allocations received by his school:

They are very giving to [school]...We are very fortunate that we have enough people, enough teachers. Our class sizes for our freshman initiative are 25 or less. For upper-level classes probably 26 to 30 in that range. They are very generous.

Another example of differentiation by need at the campus-level includes Campus Support Team visits which only occur at campuses with a principal new to the district and those schools that have yet to achieve at least a Recognized rating. One assistant superintendent justified this two tiered system as a way to provide more intensive support to those schools with the greatest need, “Campus Support Teams are only for campuses that are academically acceptable. It’s aligned with that whole notion that we give the most support, the most time, the most attention, to schools that need it the most”. Principals new to the district receive additional visits from direct supervisors as well as an additional customer satisfaction survey conducted at mid-year.

Teachers also receive resources based on need that is based on both the needs of the campus as well as individual needs of the teacher. Though the district provides the content for professional development, teachers may choose specific professional development based on their own identified needs or the results of student assessment data. Teachers in need of assistance have support from both campus-level instructional facilitators and district-level curriculum specialists.

Students also receive support based on need as demonstrated in the following examples. Summer School is provided free of charge to any student

who fails the TAKS. Village ISD has offered an alternative high school for over a decade that has been honored for its rate of students graduating from high school and passing Graduate Equivalency Diploma exams. Students have access to a variety of academies spanning interests from the Math, Engineering, Technology, and, Science Academy (METSA) to Cosmetology. Students who need additional academic support to be successful in Advanced Placement courses may choose AVID as an elective.

Differentiation in family support includes access to social services on specified campuses and a program that provides free refurbished district computers to families with financial needs. The centrally located Community Learning Center offers a variety of continuing education courses for adults including English as a Second Language, technology courses, and parenting classes. Additional community outreach efforts occur at both the district and campus-level.

The previous examples serve as evidence that Village ISD does not just say, “all children will learn”, but actually puts into practice structures that support all children to learn. These structures are the outgrowth of a culture of shared accountability. While the district makes no excuses for results based on economic needs of its students, it provides differentiated support to assist those campuses and students with the greatest need to make the greatest progress. In short, the actions taken in Village ISD support the beliefs espoused in the district’s vision



that: “All students will ...graduate college-ready without remediation”. The next section will explore how Village ISD selected the processes and strategies that contributed to closing achievement gaps.

*Question 2: How did the district select which processes and/or strategies to employ in order to make progress toward closing student achievement gaps across all population groups?*

In the previous section, the major processes that had contributed to Village ISD’s closing achievement gaps were identified with supporting evidence from the study. These findings clarified *what* processes had been selected; this section will offer findings on *how* these strategies were selected for implementation. The data revealed two major processes related to selection of strategies: Village ISD endorsed district-level decision-making and engineered a research-based and inquiry-driven decision making culture.

#### *Endorsed District-Level Decisions*

Who makes decisions related to learning and teaching determines whether a district relies more heavily on district-level or campus-level decisions. If the majority of decisions are made by district staff and transmitted to campus leadership for deployment, the organization can be said to endorse district-level decisions. Conversely, districts that defer the majority of decisions related to learning and teaching to campus leadership endorse campus-level decisions.

Most of our nation's public schools are organized together in school districts which serve as a governing body and often provide centralized services such as tax collection, budget dispersal, transportation, food service, payroll, benefits, maintenance, and construction of facilities. Depending on the size and management philosophy of the district, other services generated or maintained as district-level systems may include professional development, curriculum, assessment, and student support services. Historically, district leadership made the majority of the decisions and directed the work of campuses through a centralized authority.

In the past two decades, state policies have required that some decision-making authority be shifted to campus sites in what became known as site-based decision making. "The essential purpose of site-based decision making is to improve student performance by bringing together parents, teachers, administrators, and other interested community parties and empowering them with increased administrative authority in governing their local schools" (Wyman, 2000, p. 255).

In Texas, State Education Code 11.253, requires that each individual school maintain a site-based structure and specifies six areas of site-level decisions (Texas Statutes, 2006):

the campus-level committee shall be involved in decisions in the areas of planning, budgeting, curriculum, staffing patterns, staff development, and

school organization. The campus-level committee must approve the portions of the campus plan addressing campus staff development needs.

While states have mandated the adoption of site-based decision making policies, the efficacy of this decision-making model to impact student achievement has yet to be determined (Wyman, 2000). The advent of site-based decision making, and subsequent legal and policy requirements for schools and districts to implement and maintain site-based structures, has compelled districts to favor campus-site decisions in lieu of district-level decisions (Meyers, Meyers, & Gelzheiser, 2001).

In contrast, over the last several years, Village ISD has shifted back to district-level decision-making. An assistant superintendent explained the pendulum swinging in Village ISD between centralized authority to site-based decision-making and back to district-level decisions as:

We probably went overboard, just like many districts when the first legislation came out. ‘Well, is this a site-decision or is this a district decision?’ We more and more have a district focus. We have very little site-decisions about staff development. It’s district staff development. Very little decisions about instructional strategies, pedagogy, methodology, whatever you want to call it.

The next question becomes, are the principals of Village ISD satisfied with this shift from site-based management to a centralized decision-making model? A secondary principal shared the following:

Now certainly there are things within the school that you involve the site based [team] but in terms of what we teach, and how we’re going to teach it, then our focus is district-wide. And I like that because you know it really takes the guessing out of it. As an administrator it helps you focus on, ‘Okay this is where we’re going. We’re going to get really good at

this.’ Instead of everybody is going in different directions. You know you’ve got to have a roadmap and this provides that for us.

These sentiments were shared by each of the principal respondents. Rather than feeling constrained by the district-level decisions being made, the principals interviewed expressed that district-level decisions on instructional methods and district provision of professional development provided them with the necessary backing to enforce best-practice instruction with teachers and improve student achievement.

An additional outcome of this return to district-level decision making is the pervasive sense of cohesion expressed by the respondents in this study. While this quote is from a secondary principal, similar sentiments were shared by each of the principal respondents:

What I like about our district is that we're not 25 different districts. We move as one organization. And the power of that is pretty phenomenal. When I pick up the phone and call another principal, we are speaking the same language. And we'll bounce ideas off of one another but we feel like we're all on the same track.

The data revealed that engineering a researched-based and inquiry-driven decision-making model combined with endorsement of district-level decisions was the process used by Village ISD to select which strategies to employ to close achievement gaps. Once the researched strategies were selected through district-level decisions, further processes were needed to successfully deploy the selected strategies.

### *Engineered a Research-Based and Inquiry-Driven Decision Making Culture*

In a researched-based and inquiry-driven decision-making culture, alternatives are carefully scrutinized based on factual data rather than popularity or personal preference. Research-based best practice has become a common phrase in educational circles. The term “scientifically based research” appears 69 times in the language of the No Child Left Behind Act (U. S. Congress, 2001b). But while there is a clear expectation that educational practices have support of research, the rigor required of good research is less well defined. Educational journals and magazines are filled with advertisements for programs that claim to have solid research supporting their efficacy. In order to separate which programs or software products have reliable, valid, independently produced research-based support, and which are cloaked in pseudo, or conflict of interest research studies has placed an additional burden on today’s educators (Oppenheimer, 2007).

Rather than seeking out and purchasing packaged programs, Village ISD central office staff have investigated educational best-practice strategies. Next, they develop district-wide systems to deploy these strategies such as professional development conducted by district staff in a trainer of trainers model, provision of necessary resources, clearly stated expectations for use, and monitoring of instructional practices and results. This district research-based process, which delineates instructional strategies available to teachers has direct impact on classroom instruction.

Central office staff, and in particular, the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction are noted for their use of research in making decisions. As a secondary principal explained:

And pretty much exclusively over the last four years or so, I guess that's about how long [Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction has] been doing that job, everything that we've done, everything that we've read, everything we've discussed, has been very research-based. That has not always been the case in other districts and even earlier in this school district.

Another assistant superintendent explained that the process for research begins in central office for three reasons, first, due to the “expertise and intelligence” of the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum & Instruction, and:

Secondly, because we have the time and resources and people to research something. And thirdly, there is less and less opportunity for a campus to even pilot something without our asking them to pilot. For example, [a principal] back in the old days said he wanted to do thinking maps and did thinking maps and then it caught on and then all of the other schools [did, too]. Now more than likely, they would go to [Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction] and say I really want to do something can I? And she'd research it and she'd say, “Well, that's fine that will be good. It's consistent with what we are trying to do. It doesn't take away from anything else. If you want to work at it as a campus you may do so.

Principals and other central office staff members also recognized the connection between research and district-level decisions regarding instruction. The final section will address the processes used by Village ISD to implement the strategies that resulted in making progress toward closing achievement gaps.

*Question 3: How did the district implement the identified processes and/or strategies to make progress toward closing student achievement gaps across all population groups?*

The first research questions focused on how Village ISD made progress in closing achievement gaps and this broad question was followed by two questions regarding the processes used by Village ISD to select and then deploy strategies. Three major processes were identified in the movement from decisions related to the “what” or the strategies selected to impact student achievement to the “how” or implementation of these strategies. The data revealed Village ISD staff: intentionally managed change, deployed initiatives and systems district-wide, and embraced a commitment to professional learning.

#### *Intentionally Managed Change*

Organizations that intentionally manage change purposefully address ways to facilitate the change process and improve the organization’s ability to respond to changing conditions. While Fullan states that “change cannot be managed. It can be understood and perhaps led, but it cannot be controlled” (2001a, p. 33); others offer specific steps and guidelines to improve an organization’s ability to manage change (Gardner, 2004; Wasson, 2004). Respondents in the study of Village ISD did not claim to be able to control change, but data supported that district leaders used knowledge about successful change and change processes to implement the new strategies selected to improve student achievement. The

findings on how the district intentionally managed change revealed district members: acknowledged the need for change, focused on a few priorities, and planned with flexibility.

*Acknowledged the Need for Change.* Acknowledging the need for change includes accepting that adjustments need to be made. Village ISD staff recognized the need for change in response to changes in local conditions, including demographic changes, as well as the changing demands of a society based more and more on technology usage and intellectual capital. Village ISD has long been known as a leading school district, but it had originally achieved this reputation while serving a primarily White, economically stable population. Over the past ten years, the students served by Village ISD have become more ethnically diverse and the district has experienced a simultaneous increase in the percentages of students coming from families with economic challenges. District leadership recognized that classroom practices would need to change in order to continue to increase academic achievement with a more diverse student population. A central office staff member described the district's realization of the need for change in classroom instruction in order to serve all students well:

We know that right now you're teaching in a middle-class school -- guess what in probably two or even three years it ain't going to be a middle-class school. As the population shifts more and more you're going to feel it and it's the frog in the boiling water and it's going to be happening before you realize it. So let us help you get ready for that.



It must be stressed that Village ISD did not see the change in demographics as an excuse to lower expectations; on the contrary, the district increased its expectations that all students will achieve high standards. As a central office staff member who witnessed the changes described:

And I watched that staff over the six years go from some of them having some resistance to the change because they had basically signed up in a White suburban district and ended up being in a more urban environment. And our whole district has progressed towards that. We're down to 23% White. And our Economically Disadvantaged kids are slightly above half.

But because that has come over an extended period of time, people have matured into that acceptance of the students with appropriate high expectations. This district has never lost, or never excused academic performance because of shifting demographics.

Our goals have always been high. Principals have always been challenged to have their campuses perform high. It's just kind of -- it's really a culture issue. And I really think that's what has brought the success is within a culture of expectancy of high student performance by all students.

Acknowledging the need for change has not been limited to changing demographics. The rising global economy combined with technological advances has led to an explosion of fields and industries never before considered. Preparing students for entry into this information age means preparing them for careers that probably do not yet exist (Friedman, 2005). Village ISD has recognized the need to prepare students to utilize technology and has sought to increase technological applications in the classrooms. A high school education alone will not be enough to obtain and maintain a job in our current economy. In order to adapt to an evolving work force, students must be prepared to be self-motivated learners who

accept that their need for learning new knowledge and skills will continue throughout their lifetime.

As stated in the district's vision, Village ISD has dedicated itself to prepare every student to be college ready without remediation. This vision requires a different set of district expectations for students as well as for educational outcomes. As an assistant superintendent stated:

And I think with that college ready without remediation the real challenge for school districts is that 50 years ago this much information was not around. And information doubles now every year versus every seven years. With electronic median one of our challenges is to try to sift through and find out the really important stuff. Really what needs to be taught. And more importantly how you learn because the content is going to change...You have to evolve. We are a society that is an intellectual society...We are not an industrial world anymore.

To prepare greater numbers of students for the rigors of post high school education, including college, Village ISD has opened up advanced courses that had once only enrolled the highest achieving students. AVID, a companion program to assist average students in achieving high academic standards is also offered at the secondary schools with the greatest percentages of low income students. Certification programs have been created through academies to prepare students for high paying entry-level positions. As a school board member passionately shared:

And in our district especially, we recognize the criticality of preparing students to go to college without remediation. To be prepared to go to college. And to do what ever we can do to help them get college credit to prove to them that they can.

But beyond that we recognize the need and the reality that a lot of these kids can't afford to go when they first get out. And so we also have to prepare them to be able to earn a living so that they can survive well enough to be able to get more education. And we have implemented a number of programs that are specifically designed to do that. A lot of schools have body shop or auto mechanics; we have NAFTA Certification Programs...So that when a student graduates from high school they are NAFTA Certified in four areas. They can walk into any dealership and get a \$40, \$45, \$50,000 a year job. They can come out of our schools Cisco Network Administrator One Certified. They can come out with Microsoft MCSC Certification, or Web Designers.

So they can be prepared to do something that supports themselves while they manage to go to college. And if we can do that we can change the world. At least our world.

Another distinctive phenomenon found in the data is that respondents eagerly shared additional areas that needed to be addressed and changed. This dissatisfaction with current conditions and outcomes connects to the commitment to continuous improvement noted earlier. In spite of the progress that has been made in closing achievement gaps and providing high expectations for all students, members of Village ISD are not satisfied with current results and continue to identify areas for further change.

*Focused on a Few Priorities.* Organizations are faced with a myriad of options for growth and development. Focusing on a few priorities requires that the organization pursue a limited number of initiatives. In addition to acknowledging the need for change, Village ISD district leadership intentionally selected a few priorities and maintained focus on these priorities over an extended period of

time. As in the case of the Content Literacy Strategies, rather than introduce all ten strategies at once, district leadership chose to focus on only a few strategies each year. This incremental process over a period of four years allowed for a deep understanding and application of the new strategies. The superintendent explains her approach to introducing new strategies:

I think what I've learned in the 10 years is to slow it down a little bit and not to require a hundred things but to require three or four things. And I'm a very quick learner and I expect everybody else to be and that's not the way it's going to happen. We're trying to get more in depth into what we're doing and try to make people understand that these things really do work if you'll do them in depth and that's our emphasis now.

We're going to stick with Marzano's Strategies; we're going to stick with Content Literacy Strategies. We're going to stick with them until we feel like most of our people really have them.

Principals echoed that this targeted, coordinated focus has supported sustained changes in classroom practice. As a secondary principal declared:

And it's not scatter shooting approach. It's not a, "This year were going to do this initiative and then next year we're going to do some other initiative that pushes that one out". We've been working on the same work for four years in a row now. Nothing that we talked about four years ago... has gone away.

[Assistant superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction] came in and started talking about content literacy strategies and we are still talking about content literacy. Every new initiative we talk about ties back to that. So I think we have a very coordinated approach here rather than just a sort of a haphazard reform du jour kind of approach that happens a lot.

The data supports that progress in closing achievement gaps can be attributed in part to these focused and sustained efforts.

*Planned with Flexibility.* Strategic planning includes setting goals and designing action steps to meet those goals. Planning with flexibility requires that an organization be able to adapt to changing conditions. A process embedded in Village ISD's intentional management of change involves planning with flexibility. In introducing new initiatives, Village ISD has established a pattern of assigning research and planning to a group of individuals before venturing into new territory. Such was the case in the Ninth Grade Initiative recently instituted at district high schools. Before committing to this model, principals from each district high schools, selected teacher leaders, and the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction conducted a year-long study on researched-best practice for ninth grade students. After conducting the research, the committee developed goals and made recommendations for implementing a district-wide Ninth Grade Initiative. The district did not hesitate in implementing the plan and within a year of the committee's recommendations offered the Ninth Grade Initiative at all Village ISD High Schools.

As can be seen in the Ninth Grade Initiative example, organizational philosophies which tended to support long-range planning have begun to shift toward shorter range planning models. These tighter planning models offer multiple feedback loops and opportunities to re-adjust in order to meet rapidly changing environmental conditions (Bossidy & Charan, 2002; Collins, 2001; Friedman, 2005). Village ISD has employed academic feedback loops through

district-developed benchmark assessments that provide real-time information to teachers on how well students are able to apply new learning. Teachers are expected to make adjustments in instruction to meet the needs identified by the benchmark results.

Readjusting planning at the district-level can be more cumbersome than making adjustments in the classroom; however, Village ISD respondents reported that district leadership has committed to making frequent modifications to district plans. An assistant superintendent shared this example of district planning with flexibility:

I think another good thing that we do here is that we're willing to adjust. Planning is important, but if you aren't willing to adjust that plan - literally every day if necessary, then your plan probably is more of an impediment than it is a tool. [The superintendent] works hard at planning the future. But I can tell you, everybody here knows that she is not a bit afraid of walking in here four days after the plan is made and saying, "You know what? We are smarter now than we were four days ago. And this is new information." We're not going to just keep doing the same plan. Even though it's brand-new.

As illustrated in the above quote, Village ISD district leaders have realized that they too must make the shift to shorter planning cycles which allow for greater flexibility. The superintendent acknowledged the need to plan with greater flexibility. She shared that in the future the district will probably not develop a five-year strategic plan, but will try to set three-year goals supported by a three-year planning cycle.

### *Deployed Initiatives and Systems District-Wide*

Districts can choose to deploy initiatives and systems campus-by-campus or can institute initiatives and systems throughout the entire organizational structure. Village ISD has instituted deployment of initiatives and systems district-wide. These district-deployed initiatives and systems encompass several major areas including: professional development, accountability and data management, distribution of technology that supports learning as well as effective work tools for staff, development of an on-line curriculum repository, instructional supervision protocols, and even classroom practices such as the Content Literacy Strategies (CLS).

The district-deployed online curriculum has helped to foster cohesion while at the same time providing for individualization by teachers as shown in the following quote from a principal:

[the online curriculum] is huge bringing about consistency from one building to another and yet it still allows the option for a teacher to have the opportunity for the art of how it's done. It also enables principals to be in a classroom, or look at a set of lesson plans, and go online and see where they are and where they need to be.

In Village ISD, adoption of district initiatives such as CLS, on-line curriculum, and utilization of data to drive instructional decisions were supported by district deployed systems such as: funding on-site instructional facilitators, district personnel modeling data analysis, instructional observations, and feedback through Campus Support Teams (CST); district-developed professional

development modules; district staff serving as on-call resources to principals and teachers; and at the secondary level, district funding to provide an additional professional development period. In spite of demographic and academic outcome differences between high schools, the Ninth Grade Initiative was also deployed district-wide.

Rather than feeling constrained by mandatory district-developed systems, the six principals interviewed conveyed an appreciation of district assistance and guidance and commented on the cohesive environment created by district deployed practices. As a secondary principal expressed:

I know one size does not fit all but I think there are standard practices that should be exhibited at each campus regardless of the size because I think that's what makes the team concept. That you put everyone on the same page. That we're all doing the same thing. If everyone is allowed to do just what they feel and just do their own thing that's when you get a lot of discrepancy and you really have the gaps that you really try not to have.

District staff intentionally managing change by acknowledging the need for change in response to both local conditions of changing demographics, as well as the need to align educational outcomes to the market demands of a global economy based on technology and innovation. Staff ability to adopt new strategies was augmented by focusing on a few priorities, adopting short-term planning with flexibility, and deploying initiatives and systems district-wide to impact positive changes at the campus and classroom level. While district deployed initiatives and systems discussed here included professional learning,



the district's support of professional learning extends beyond the provision of a few workshops and warrants further exploration.

*Embraced a Commitment to Professional Learning*

Professional learning consists of the time, training, and resources as well as the access an organization provides to the development and growth of its people. Village ISD has supported progress in closing achievement gaps by fully embracing a commitment to professional learning. One assistant superintendent extolled the value of a commitment to professional learning:

I think the commitment to make sure that our principals are the best of their profession, that they are constantly learning, that they know what good instruction is, how kids learn, how the whole teaching learning process works, because you can go back through all the research, you are going to find that schools that were successful had successful principals. That's the key.

The professional learning processes used in Village ISD can be viewed through The National Staff Development Council's Standards (2001) which are organized into three areas: process, content, and context.

*Process - District-Deployed Research-Based Professional Development.*

In contrast to some districts which use a site-based approach to professional learning that puts the responsibility for selecting and deploying professional development on the principal and campus site-based committee, the process in Village ISD has involved district-deployed, research-based professional

development. A secondary principal emphasized the district's commitment to providing professional development for principals and campus staff:

I could speak a long time on how I really feel this district has empowered me to be an instructional leader. Many times I would feel in other places and other times I was responsible to go get it myself and bring it back. And you still need to do some of that to continue to grow and be a lifelong learner; however, knowing my role as a principal our district understands what we have to do.

While Village ISD does expect all members to continue to grow and develop, it does not require that individual teachers, schools, or principals conduct their own research on best practice and then arrange for training. The commitment to professional learning at the district-level extends beyond merely providing funding for consultants or professional materials. District leaders, including all the assistant superintendents are directly involved in facilitating professional development including the NISL principal leadership training observed as part of the research. This was not an isolated situation. One central office director described the impact this direct involvement in presenting professional development has on the district's culture of accountability:

[Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction] She doesn't designate someone to do it [deliver professional development] she does it. So when it comes from the big boss and she's doing the training you know it's going to be done.

*Context* – By district leadership providing well-developed professional learning experiences to campus staff and leadership personnel, district leaders dictate both the content of the training and the context in which it is delivered.

Village ISD has established an expectation that professional development emulate best-practices for adult learning. Rather than deliver one-shot work shops, district-developed professional development has been delivered through the context of ongoing, job embedded professional learning. This professional learning is often delivered through a trainer of trainers model and further supplemented by book studies, classroom observations and feedback, conferences, and learning team formats. Village ISD has chosen a targeted focus for professional learning in two specific arenas: effective instructional strategies and building leadership capacity through the development of effective teams.

*Content – Effective Instructional Strategies.* Four years ago, when district leaders decided to require that all K-12 teachers receive training in research-based Content Literacy Strategies (CLS) they crafted a plan for staged deployment of the strategies. Modules were developed to introduce each strategy in the context of learning and teaching. These modules were first shared with principals and campus teacher leaders who then replicated the learning experiences for the staff at each campus. Each year, the district introduced two additional literacy strategies while maintaining expectations that all previously introduced strategies remain deeply deployed. The desired outcome has been a common language among all Village ISD teachers K-12, as well as the continuity this vertical alignment of strategies provides for students as they move from classroom to classroom and grade to grade.

*Content - Building Leadership Capacity.* The second professional learning thrust in Village ISD concerns the intentional development of principals and teachers as instructional leaders as well as the development of effective teams of leaders. An assistant superintendent painted a vivid picture of what happens if a principal is not able to effectively bring teams of people together:

The more support you can give the principals, the better you can fit their skills to the school, the more success you're going to have. But what makes it so hard and makes it so complex is your content knowledge can be great. You can spout off everything about Marzano, and you can just go on and on and on with the gurus, but if you can't bring teams together, and you can't work with people, and you can't work with parents, then it's not going to move. It's not going to go forward. A lot of people would be great principals of an orphanage. But that's not the reality of what we have. So you do have to deal with those.

The district's recognition that principals need to be exposed to the knowledge and skills needed to be effective instructional leaders, as well as effective at building leadership capacity in others is reflected in this quote from an assistant superintendent:

I still think that instructional leadership is really the heart of school improvement. I think it's evolved though into not only an instructional leader but being a leader of instructors. Because a principal can't be a content expert in everything, but they do have to inspire and model teaching and learning.

District leadership has made a multi-year commitment with the National Institute for School Leadership (NISL) to provide a trainer of trainers model of professional learning specifically designed to increase the knowledge and skills in instructional leadership and build effective teams leading to increased leadership

capacity at each campus site. The process used to deploy this content and the context in which it was deployed warrant further description. After conducting research on NISL and choosing this organization as a learning resource, district leaders selected principals, central office directors, and three of the assistant superintendents to train as NISL leaders. These district NISL team members spent a year learning about instructional leadership and deploying the practices learned through NISL with their own staffs, which gave them an opportunity to actually test-run what they had learned. The following year, this same team of district and campus leaders delivered eleven days of leadership modules to every principal, high school associate principal, and other selected campus leaders. Each of the participants in the Village ISD NISL training will now take this training and lead their own campus staff members in book studies, required focused dialogue, and experiential tasks to replicate the NISL training district-wide. As one secondary principal enthusiastically declared:

So I think a lot of it comes with staff development. We have an outstanding staff development...A lot of times we receive professional development at the district-level for our instructional leaders and we take that back to our individual campuses. So the expectation is that this will continue to go forth.

By utilizing a trainer of trainers model, the district not only gains from having ‘resident experts’ available on-call in the district, but also increases the leadership capacity of the principals involved in delivering NISL, and other instructional content.

### *Sustained and Effective District Leadership*

While the purpose of this research was to determine the processes employed by a district that had made progress in closing achievement gaps, it must be noted that the data gathered also revealed a key component that is not process related. Further, this key component appears to be the driver of the district's successful deployment of processes whether examining how the district nurtured a culture of shared accountability, selected and built the various support systems it has put in place, or how these systems have been implemented. This key component is sustained and effective district-level leadership.

When scrutinizing the success of Village ISD, or any other organization, it is important to determine what, or who, are the drivers of the culture and systems. This requires looking beyond individual parts and how these parts interact to examine the organization as a whole (Wheatley, 2006). Throughout the interviews conducted in Village ISD, the central drivers that emerged were the superintendent and district leadership team composed of the four assistant superintendents for: administration personnel; curriculum and instruction; student, family, and community service; and support service. Respondents consistently credited these five individuals as the primary reason for Village ISD's progress in closing academic achievement gaps. This quote from a secondary principal represents respondent beliefs concerning district-level leadership contributions:

I think first and foremost because of our leadership. The effective leadership and I think the teamwork. And that's putting it very simplistically but I really truly believe because of the leadership and starting with the superintendent but from the assistant supts. to the principals to our teacher leaders. I think it's quite apparent the expectation of our school district.

While the superintendent and leadership team are not a process, the research presented in this report would be incomplete without clarification on what the data had revealed about the impact that this leadership team has had on the processes to make progress in closing achievement gaps. In particular, research revealed that this effective district-level leadership team nurtured the culture of shared accountability and built district structures and systems to support learning and achievement.

### *Sustained Leadership*

Maintaining strong leadership over time can augment organizational progress, while changes in district-level leadership can generate uncertainty and derail reform efforts. “Sustaining high-quality leadership at the district level is essential to creating supportive conditions for reform” (Datnow & Castellano, 2003, p. 188). The superintendent of Village ISD has served the district for ten years. This is remarkable considering the average superintendent tenure is estimated to be between 5 to 6 years (Byrd, Drews, & Johnson, 2006). In their meta-analysis of the effect of superintendent leadership on achievement, Waters and Marzano (2007) concluded, “the longevity of the superintendent has a

positive effect on the average academic achievement of students in the district”

(p. 5).

In addition to the superintendent, each of the assistant superintendents has been in the district for at least 10 years. The members of the Board of Trustees have also demonstrated longevity of service. The current president of the board of trustees is serving his twelfth year on the school board and the majority of the 2006 board of trustee members had also served multiple three-year terms.

As one assistant superintendent declared:

Well I'll start with what I think is the number one reason [for progress in closing achievement gaps] and that is sustained leadership over time. We haven't had a change in leadership in 10 years. I think that starts with the superintendent for sure. Although [assistant superintendent's] role has changed a little bit, and [assistant superintendent's] on her third or fourth year, the core leadership I think has been consistent and hasn't changed certainly from her.

I think our board leadership has been consistent. We have not had a lot of changeover in board members in the past 10 years. A few but not wholesale - not a seven-member change or five-member change. One or two people... that has a lot to do with it because it keeps things in place that you've got going and it helps things that you've started to implement maintain, but also see them to fruition. If you start something, and you never finish it, you never even see the benefits of it. So I think the number one reason is the sustained leadership that we had here for the past 10 years.

The results of the research in Village ISD support that in addition to longevity, the superintendent and her cabinet of assistant superintendents are regarded as highly competent, both individually and collectively as a leadership team.



### *Superintendent Leadership*

Impact on student achievement depends on more than just the length of time a superintendent or other leaders have served in the district. In order for sustained leadership to be effective, the leader(s) must also be competent in skills correlated to improvements in student achievement such as setting non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, securing school board alignment with district goals, monitoring progress, and effectively allocating resources (Waters & Marzano, 2007).

The superintendent plays a very visible and political role in a district the size of Village ISD. She is charged with ensuring student achievement as well as fiscally managing a multimillion dollar organization. In addition to personally demonstrating effective leadership by clearly articulating expectations and non-negotiables, setting goals for achievement and instruction, monitoring progress, and aligning district resources to goals, the superintendent of Village ISD has set a standard of behavior, commitment, and passion that inspires those around her. An assistant superintendent described what it has been like to work alongside the superintendent for the past ten years:

In your lifetime, you probably get to meet four unique people – truly unique people if you are blessed and she would be one of my four. She is not only effective and not only exceptional but truly unique. She gets the job done and even gets on you and you still feel good and want to go out and work harder.

A board member, who had known the superintendent when she had been a teacher leader in the district many years ago, had much to say about her including:

She is a strong educator first of all, and she is personable. She is smart and wants the best for kids. She wants the leaders in her district, her teachers, her administrators, to do their job and to do it well. And if not, she's going to be on top of them. I would imagine she's very difficult to work for if you're not doing your job right. You'll know that she knows.

Principal respondents concurred, as noted here by an elementary principal:

When I came in, my first point of contact was our superintendent. And I came here because of her [superintendent] and because of what I learned, what I felt, what we talked about when I first visited with her. And what I found after coming here is that she exemplifies and sets the pace for all of us. And that is also very evident in our board. They support what we do and what we're about. It's not just talk.

The superintendent; however, does not accept credit for the accomplishments of the district. Instead, she recognizes the work of others. This statement by the superintendent serves as an example of her acknowledgement of her team, “we have a strong team here. We are all dedicated to making sure all kids can perform”. The data supports that the strong team she has assembled has collectively contributed to the progress in closing achievement gaps in the district.

#### *District Leadership Team*

School districts are complex institutions. Leading an organization that interacts daily with over 30,000 people would be a monumental task without the support of an effective, collaborative, leadership team. In the words of the superintendent, “... you have to get a good team, and you've got to get a team that

shares your vision for the district”. In Village ISD, the superintendent did just that. While three of the assistant superintendents were already serving as assistant superintendents when the current superintendent was hired, over the course of the past ten years, she has altered the roles that two of them serve. Four years ago, she hired one of Village ISD’s high school principals to serve as the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. The four assistant superintendents were frequently described by respondents as highly competent individuals respected for their talents and expertise. This remark, from a secondary principal about the assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction was a commonly expressed sentiment among respondents:

[she] is one of the smartest people I have ever met in this business. I mean she is truly one of the most scholarly, eloquent, deep thinking, critical thinking people I have ever met in this business.

Perhaps more importantly, these four assistant superintendents and the superintendent saw themselves as a team. Rather than viewing their work in separate silos, this district-level leadership team collaborates in several key areas. Together they created the systems to select, develop, and evaluate campus leaders; engineered research-based, inquiry-driven decision making; intentionally managed change; aligned resources to the district vision and goals; and differentiated the dispersal of resources based on need. The district-level leadership team nurtured a culture of shared accountability and built district structures and systems to support learning and achievement. The organization of

their collective work serves as tangible evidence of both a commitment to student success as well as personal accountability for the results of each student and campus.

### *Summary Chapter Five*

Village ISD serves an ethnically and economically diverse community of over 26,000 students. In 2006, it was one of only four Recognized districts in Texas that served more than 10,000 ethnically diverse students with at least 35% qualifying as Economically Disadvantaged. The purpose of this research was to uncover the processes employed by the school district to make progress in closing achievement gaps with all students.

Data gathered through interviews, direct observation, and document examination revealed the district: created systems to select, develop and evaluate of campus-level leaders; nurtured a culture of shared accountability for results; crafted systems of accountability; built district structures to support learning and achievement; engineered a research-based and inquiry-driven decision-making culture; endorsed district-level decision-making; intentionally managed change; deployed initiatives and systems district-wide; and embraced a commitment to professional learning.

While the members of Village ISD are the first to admit that the district must continue to seek ways to improve educational outcomes for all students, the

progress made in the district to achieve a Recognized rating in 2006 supports the notion that districts can make a difference.

## Chapter 6: Summary, Conclusions, and Implications

“We must. We can. We will. That's what I keep saying every day, we must, we can, we will,” Superintendent, Village ISD, 2007

Each year, over 48 million children are educated in America's public schools. While our country has become progressively more diverse, our nations' schools still appear to address the needs of White students, and those whose families are more financially secure better than it addresses the needs of students of color and students who qualify as Economically Disadvantaged. These achievement gaps are present in results from national and state of Texas assessments as well as in educational attainment levels including: high school completion, college attendance, and college completion rates.

### *History of Reforms*

Beginning in the 1970's with the Effective Schools research conducted by Edmonds (R. Edmonds, 1979) and others (Lezotte & Bancroft, 1985), and continuing through the 1980's with the adoption of educational criteria for the Malcolm Baldrige Quality Improvement Award (Baldrige National Quality Program, 2006), and on into the 1990's with the introduction of the Stupski Foundation Components (Stupski Foundation, 2005) and the emergence of Professional Learning Communities Characteristics (DuFour & Eaker, 1998), educators and researchers have been identifying “what” works in schools or school districts. An analysis of these four educational frameworks revealed

extensive overlap in the elements identified as being essential to school and/or district success to close achievement gaps. Common elements included: strong leadership, clear mission and vision, strategic planning, collaboration and stakeholder engagement, focus on learning, professional development, process management, and accountability with measurement and monitoring. From the results of this review, it appears clear that these four frameworks represent considerable agreement on what elements need to be in place in schools and districts in order to close achievement gaps; however, in spite of long-term access to this information, achievement gaps have continued.

#### *Re-Statement of the Problem*

Since the passage of the NCLB in 2001 (U. S. Congress, 2001b), closing achievement gaps has literally become the law of the land. While individual schools, particularly those at the elementary level have demonstrated the ability to close achievement gaps, district-wide success has been rare (Cuban & Usdan, 2002). Under the more rigorous assessments and accountability criteria adopted by the state (Texas Education Agency, 2006d), Texas school districts previously heralded for closing, (Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000) and even eliminating achievement gaps (Hernandez, 2004) have not been able to maintain this progress. What additional knowledge is needed in order for schools and districts to improve achievement for all children and eliminate achievement gaps currently present for students of color and students who are Economically Disadvantaged?

### *Purpose of Study*

If knowledge about “what” to do to close achievement gaps has been readily available for the past forty years, why do these achievement gaps continue to persist? Researchers (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005) describe this phenomenon as the “knowing-doing” gap: having the knowledge of “what” to do, but lacking the knowledge of “how” to do it. In order to reveal the secrets to district-level success, it would be necessary to uncover the processes (how) that underlie the strategies (what). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine how a Texas school district made progress in closing achievement gaps with all students.

### *Research Questions*

Three questions have informed this research:

1. How did a school district in Texas make progress toward closing achievement gaps across all population groups as measured by the State Accountability System?
2. How did the district select which processes and/or strategies to employ in order to make progress toward closing student achievement gaps across all population groups?
3. How did the district implement the identified processes and/or strategies to make progress toward closing student achievement gaps across all population groups?



### *Methodology and Methods*

This qualitative study has utilized a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to uncover the processes used by a single Texas district to make progress in closing achievement gaps. This study employed three sources of data which informed the findings: semi-structured interviews with eighteen respondents including the superintendent, four assistant superintendents, five central office directors, six principals, and two board members; direct observations of a district-level cabinet meeting, principal professional development, and school board meeting; and review of a variety of district documents including Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills data, demographic information, the district strategic plan, Campus Support Team agendas, principal evaluation protocols, and school board meeting minutes (Appendix F). Data analysis utilized Strauss and Corbin's three stages of coding: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

### *Summary of Findings*

Most districts know what to do. A lot of them even have the commitment to do it. They've yet -- and of course we certainly haven't found all the answers either -- to have the skills to do it. And what you've been seeing the last few days is developing the skills. We certainly know what to do. I believe we surely have the commitment. I know under [superintendent's] leadership the district has moved philosophically toward that real commitment. And then how to do it of course keeps evolving and changing. (Assistant Superintendent, Village ISD, 2007)

This study uncovered the processes employed by a single Texas school district to make progress in closing achievement gaps with all students. Though some researchers contend that individual schools are the most appropriate unit for educational change (Farrell, 2003; Hall & Hord, 2001), the findings from this study sustain previous research on the efficacy of district-level change and reform (Green & Etheridge, 2001b; Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000). The findings support three research questions of how the district made progress, how the district selected which processes and/or strategies to employ, and how the district implemented these processes and/or strategies.

#### *Making Progress Toward Closing Achievement Gaps*

The findings from Village ISD reveal that this district's progress is the result of sustained, effective district-level leadership. The district leadership team created systems to select, develop, and evaluate campus-level leaders; nurtured a culture of shared accountability; crafted systems of accountability; and built district structures to support learning and achievement.

*Sustained, Effective District-Level Leadership.* The findings support that Village ISD made progress toward closing achievement gaps due to sustained, effective district-level leadership which drove the district's culture and systems. While previous research has commonly identified leadership as a major element in effective schools (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; R. Edmonds, 1979; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004) and districts (Stupski Foundation, 2005)

this study advances the notion that in order for districts to close achievement gaps, leadership alone is not enough. System-wide progress requires sustained, effective leadership at the district-level. In Village ISD, the superintendent and her leadership team have worked together within the same district for over ten years. The core district-leadership team members have served in their current roles for at least four years. The culture and systems driven by this district-level leadership team have resulted in changes in campus and classroom practices through processes previously identified as collaborative supervision which is defined as: “joint efforts, commonality of goals, shared decision-making and responsibilities, and mutuality of respect and interests” (Ovando, 2000, p. 112).

*Create Systems to Select, Develop, and Evaluate Campus-Level Leaders.*

The findings from Village ISD reveal that effective campus-level leadership cannot be left to chance. Selection, development, and evaluation of campus principals must become an intentional, systemic process. Research supports that in order for a district to make progress in closing achievement gaps, district-level leadership must be supported by effective principals (Cotton, 2003) who possess the knowledge and skills of instructional leaders (R. Edmonds, 1979), are able to build leadership capacity (Stupski Foundation, 2005) and develop effective teams (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005). In Village ISD, district leadership recruits and selects district-level and campus-level leaders from both within the organization and from outside of the district. Once selected, these quality leaders receive

further development specifically targeted to improving instructional leadership and building leadership capacity through the development of effective campus teams. Thus, the district has been able to replicate, capable leadership throughout the organization.

*Nurture a Culture of Shared Accountability for Results.* The findings from Village ISD have revealed a culture of shared accountability for results. While previous research literature on effective districts has reported the presence of a culture focused on accountability (Cawelti, 2001a; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Snipes & Casserly, 2004; Togneri & Anderson, 2003a), the findings from this study illuminate the processes used by Village ISD to establish this culture. The district has articulated a shared, measurable vision supported by passion and commitment. District-level leaders in Village ISD have established the expectation that all students will learn and that no excuses will be accepted for poor performance; however, this hard line does not mean that district staff members hold teachers and principals solely responsible for results.

Through required focused dialogue, regular communication, and collaboration between district and campus staff, the district has embodied a commitment to continuous improvement. Rather than merely focus on systems of accountability, the intentional development of this culture of shared accountability includes active pursuit of relationships between central office staff, campus principals, teacher leaders, and community organizations. A balance between

pressure and support for results combined with the care and compassion for individuals has contributed to a strong trust in leadership. As a result of these intentional efforts, the culture of the district has shifted to one of shared accountability for results. Principal respondents stated that all students at all schools were their responsibility, not just the children in their own building (Fullan, 2001b). More importantly, central office directors and assistant superintendents shared both a philosophical belief that each was personally accountable for the results of each child and backed these sentiments with behaviors such as directly participating in Campus Support Teams and leading professional learning activities designed to create student success.

*Craft Systems of Accountability.* In addition to a culture of accountability, the findings from Village ISD indicate that there are also systems of accountability in place. The current era of accountability has been mandated through both federal (U. S. Congress, 2001b) and state (Texas Education Agency, 2006c) requirements; however, researchers identified monitoring of student progress as a correlate of Effective Schools (R. Edmonds) as early as 1979. Other educational frameworks (Baldrige National Quality Program, 2006; Eaker, DuFour, & Burnette, 2002; Stupski Foundation, 2005) as well as recent educational research (Snipes & Casserly, 2004) support accountability as a contributing factor in district success. The findings from this study expand upon

prior research by illustrating the processes used by Village ISD to craft systems of accountability.

The district developed and disseminated clearly articulated expectations and provided consistent and frequent monitoring of both accountability processes as well as student achievement results through collaborative teams comprised of both district-level and campus-level staff. This frequent, shared examination of results served to strengthen the culture of accountability as well as the systems of accountability. As a result, a reinforcing loop of accountability developed in Village ISD: comparison of results against an articulated standard, taking ownership of the results, reflecting on how to improve the results, putting new plans into place, and once again comparing the new results against the articulated standard. One tangible product of this process is evidenced through the Campus Support Team model. While respondents did not label the Campus Support Teams as collaborative supervision, Campus Support Teams reflect attributes of a collaborative supervision model which “emphasizes a collaborative focus for the purpose of enhancing teaching and learning” (Ovando, 2000, p. 109). Collaborative supervision characteristics present in the Campus Support Team model include a teaming approach that includes teachers, administrators, and other educational leaders, agreed upon joint goals, shared decision-making and data analysis designed to result in improved teaching and learning.

*Build District Structures to Support Learning and Achievement.* The findings from this study identify two processes embedded in the district's strategic planning models that have resulted in the building of district structures to support learning and achievement: alignment of district resources to the vision and goals and differentiation of the dispersal of resources based on need. These findings support elements of strategic planning previously identified by the Baldrige (2006) and Stupski (2005) educational frameworks. The finding from Village ISD are also congruent with those identified by Snipes and Casserly (2004) as well as Togneri (2003b) in research on effective urban districts; however, the findings on Village ISD further suggest that the development of district systems to support learning and achievement were dependent on a deep coherence between the stated vision and the culture of shared accountability.

The superintendent and her assistant superintendents consistently deliver the message of high expectations and follow through by allocating resources aligned to academic goals and distributing resources based on need. Fiscal acknowledgement that some students will need more time and direct support to accomplish expected achievement goals has resulted in additional resources targeted to specific programs, schools, and students. In Village ISD there are ample examples of how district actions support both the targeted allocation of resources and dispersal of resources based on identified needs.

### *Selection of Processes and/or Strategies*

Selection of processes and strategies for educational progress in closing achievement gaps concerns both who is responsible for making decisions as well as the criteria used as the basis for these decisions. The findings from this study support that Village ISD endorsed district-level decision making and engineered a research-based, inquiry-driven decision-making culture.

*Endorse District-Level Decision-Making.* The findings on Village ISD support the notion that decisions related to learning and teaching that have contributed to progress in closing achievement gaps have primarily been made at the district-level. While there is disagreement in current research on whether it is more effective for educational decisions to be primarily school/site-based (Murphy & Datnow, 2003) or district-driven (Togneri & Anderson, 2003a), in Village ISD, principal respondents asserted that this shift from site-based to district-based decision making has led to increased cohesion in the district. Principal respondents cited distribution of district developed instructional strategy modules, materials, teaching tools, and direct support from district staff members as contributing factors to a unified approach to instruction and subsequent progress in closing achievement gaps in the district.

### *Engineer a Research-Based and Inquiry Driven Decision-Making Culture.*

The findings from Village ISD assert that district-level decisions based on researched best practice have resulted in the adoption and deployment of



strategies that have changed campus and classroom practices. Research-based decision-making has been cited by a variety of sources including the NCLB (U. S. Congress, 2001b), district-level research (Cawelti, 2001b), and comprehensive school reform (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Murphy & Datnow, 2003) as a contributing factor in closing achievement gaps. While the terms research-based and inquiry-driven decision-making are in danger of becoming educational buzzwords (Oppenheimer, 2007), Village ISD has focused on selecting effective instructional strategies rather than commercially produced products. Village ISD has been able to match research-based classroom practices to student achievement needs. Even campus-proposed initiatives are first researched directly by district-level staff. District-level decisions on whether or not new initiatives are implemented contribute to a unified, district-wide approach to instruction.

#### *Implementation of Processes or Strategies*

The specific process of implementation utilized by Village ISD included intentionally managed change, deployment of initiatives and systems district-wide, and embracing a commitment to professional learning. Process management has been identified as an element of effective educational organizations (Baldrige National Quality Program, 2006; Stupski Foundation, 2005). The findings of this study support earlier research on district-level success which attributed progress in closing achievement gaps to district-level, rather than school level implementation of processes and strategies (Kim & Crasco, 2006; Skrla,

Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000; Snipes & Casserly, 2004; Togneri & Anderson, 2003a).

*Intentionally Manage Change.* The findings on Village ISD indicate that district leaders intentionally managed change. This finding supports earlier research which has concluded district progress in closing achievement gaps was related to sustained, researched-based change maintained over a period of years (Cawelti, 2001a). Specific processes revealed through the data related to the management of change in Village ISD include acknowledging the need for change (Fullan, Cuttress, & Kilcher, 2005; Togneri & Anderson, 2003a) both due to shifts in district demographics and evolving expectations wrought by a global economy. Village ISD also intentionally managed change by focusing on a few priorities and planning with flexibility (Fullan, 2001a).

*Deploy Initiatives and Systems District-Wide.* The findings from Village ISD support that district-wide progress required district-wide deployment of initiatives and systems. While the research literature supports the notion that districts must commit resources and expend the energy needed to develop and deploy unified systems at each campus site in order to realize district-level progress toward closing achievement gaps (Kim & Crasco, 2006; Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000; Snipes & Casserly, 2004; Togneri & Anderson, 2003a), the findings from Village ISD reveal specific systems designed to impact campus and classroom practice. These systems include professional development,

Campus Support Teams, accountability and data management tools, technology to improve access to learning as well as to serve as work tools, an online curriculum system, and supervision protocols. After deployment, consistent monitoring of the application of these systems ensures compliance at the campus and classroom level.

*Embrace a Commitment to Professional Learning.* The findings from Village ISD support that a district-wide commitment to professional learning has resulted in changes in campus and classroom practice. Though some research contends that the relationship between professional learning and student achievement has not been well established (Mac Iver & Farley, 2003), research on district-level success (Fullan, 2001a; Green & Etheridge, 2001b; Kim & Crasco, 2006; Snipes & Casserly, 2004; Togneri & Anderson, 2003a), effective principals (Cotton, 2003; Youngs & King, 2002) and elements identified by Baldrige Criteria (2006), Stupski Foundation Components (2005), and Professional Learning Communities Characteristics (DuFour & Eaker, 1998) all contend that professional learning is an important ingredient in school and district success.

Village ISD has recognized the need to provide deep levels of district developed professional learning diffused through principals at each campus site. These findings further identify specific areas of professional learning focused on the intentional development of instructional leadership, building campus capacity through development of effective teams, and content literacy strategies.

Professional learning deployed with teachers through campus and central office staff has been targeted to district goals which are directly related to specific student achievement needs, vertically articulated, and systematically deployed through ongoing, job-embedded professional development. Though it is not possible to establish a direct relationship between professional learning and concurrent progress in closing achievement gaps, it can be inferred that a commitment to professional learning has contributed to Village ISD's improved achievement results.

#### *A Model to Represent Village ISD*

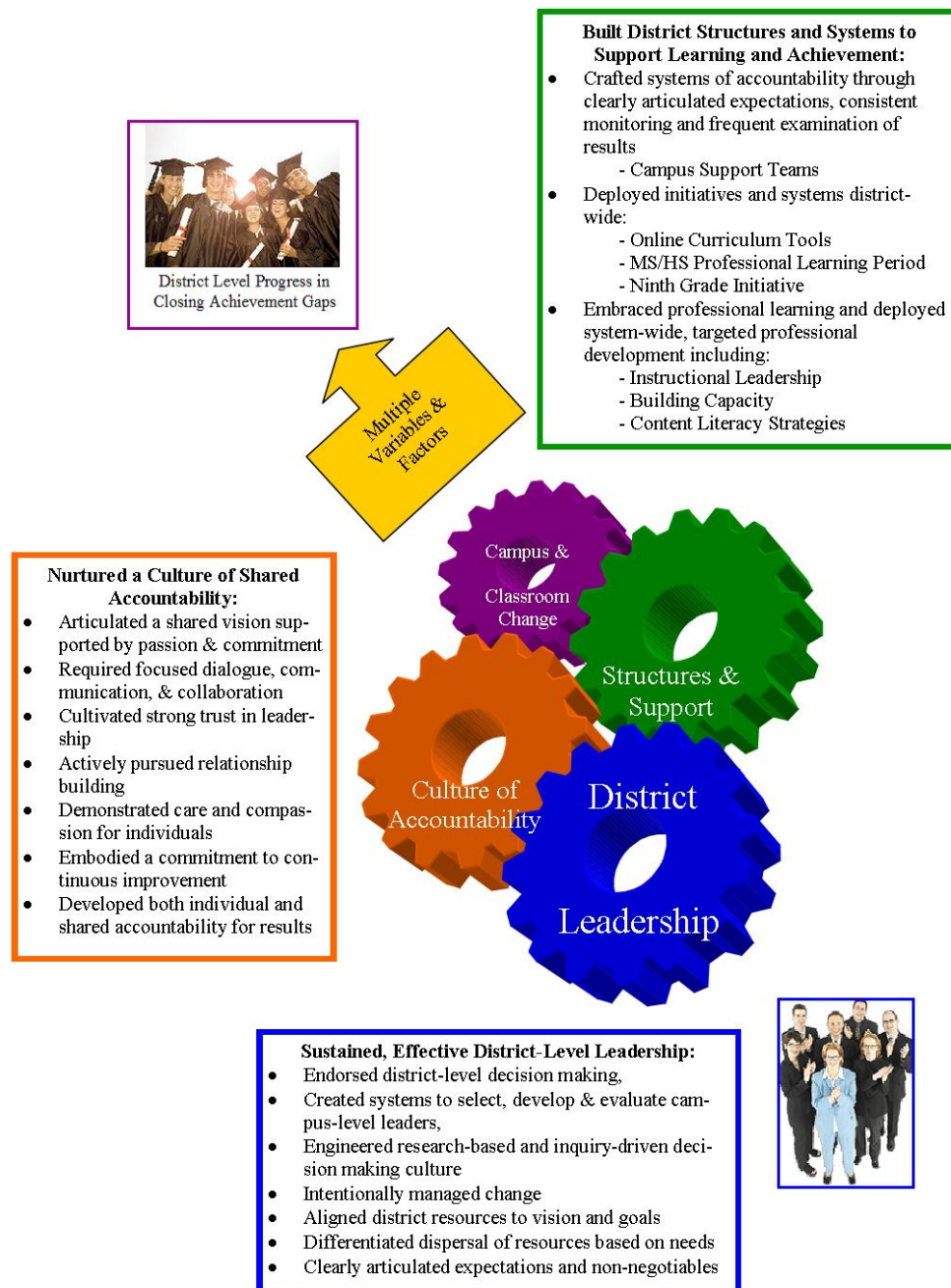
Seeing the interplay between system dynamics and individuals is a dance of discovery that requires several iterations between the whole and its parts. We expand our vision to see the whole and then narrow our gaze to peer intently into individual moments...We keep dancing between the two levels, bringing the sensitivities and information gleaned from one level to help us understand the other. If we hold awareness of the whole as we study the part, and understand the part in its relationship to the whole, profound new insights become available. (Wheatley, 2006, p. 143)

The original presentation of findings from Village ISD demonstrated that evidence had been found to answer each of the three research questions. The preceding sections of this chapter presented a discussion of the findings from this study in relation to previous research.

While this study was designed to uncover processes that led to progress in closing achievement gaps, an additional component not considered a process surfaced: sustained and effective district-level leadership. After conducting an

analysis of the directional relationships between findings, this additional component of sustained, effective district-level leadership appeared to be the primary driver of the two major processes that contributed to progress in closing achievement gaps. These effective, district-level leaders: nurtured a culture of shared accountability and built district structures and systems to support learning and achievement. Together, these three drivers have propelled changes at the campus and classroom level which have contributed to the district making progress in closing achievement gaps (Figure 1).

**Figure 1 District-Level Leadership Drives Culture and Structures Resulting in Campus and Classroom Change**



*Primary Driver: Sustained, Effective District-Level Leadership*

Throughout the data gathered in this study, district-level leadership surfaced as a key component. The superintendent and her four assistant superintendents have served as the primary drivers of processes associated with the district's progress in closing achievement gaps. The processes influenced by sustained, effective district-level leadership include: endorsed district-level decision-making; created systems to select, develop, and evaluate campus-level leaders; engineered a research-based, inquiry-driven decision-making culture; intentionally managed change; aligned district resources to vision and goals; differentiated dispersal of resources based on needs; and clearly articulated expectations and non-negotiables. Sustained, effective district-level leadership drives two secondary process drivers: nurtured a culture of shared accountability and built district structures and systems to support learning and achievement, which have impacted campus and classroom practices. Resultant changes at the campus and classroom level have contributed to increased achievement and progress in closing achievement gaps

*Secondary Process Driver: Nurtured a Culture of Shared Accountability*

The culture of accountability that Village ISD leadership has nurtured has augmented the district's ability to develop cohesion throughout the district. Processes related to the district culture of shared accountability include: articulated a shared vision supported by passion and commitment; required

focused dialogue, communication and collaboration; cultivated strong trust in leadership; actively pursued relationship building; demonstrated care and compassion for individuals; embodied a commitment to continuous improvement; and developed both individual and shared accountability for results.

It is clear from the data that the respondents included in this study believe that *all* children *will* learn. More importantly, each member holds him or herself accountable for seeing that *all* children *do* learn. The research uncovered numerous examples of how this culture of accountability is translated into action through the behaviors and beliefs of district and campus leaders including their active participation in Campus Support Teams and delivery of professional learning experiences. A companion driver to the culture of shared accountability is the structures and systems that the district has built to support learning and achievement.

*Secondary Process Driver: Built District Structures and Systems to Support Learning and Achievement*

In contrast to districts that hold individual campuses responsible for developing interventions and creating systems of support at the school site, Village ISD district leaders have actively developed and deployed structures and systems district-wide. This process driver, built district structures and systems to support learning and achievement includes: crafting systems of accountability;



deploying initiatives and systems district-wide; and embracing professional learning.

The accountability system crafted in Village ISD is derived from district-level leadership which has provided clearly articulated expectations, stated non-negotiables with consistent monitoring, and frequent examination of outcomes. Campus leaders are expected to replicate and enforce these systems at each school site. Frequent examination of results requires access to appropriate data. Again, campuses are not expected to create their own data systems. District supported benchmark assessments; customer service surveys, electronic grading, and other district developed systems provide teachers and campus principals with rich data sources.

Campuses are not considered isolated islands of reform, but part of an organized team that works interdependently. Other examples of initiatives and systems that have been deployed district-wide include online curriculum tools, the middle school and high school professional learning period, and the Ninth Grade Initiative. Once again, by deploying these initiatives district-wide, the district has established a cohesive learning and working environment.

Professional learning is also distributed at the district-level rather than campus-level. The Content Literacy Strategies serve as an example of a researched based district-level decision deployed at each campus through the principal as instructional leader. Again, the emphasis is not just on deploying new

strategies, but also developing instructional leadership through systematic delivery of professional learning to increase principal skills in building capacity at each campus site and development of effective teams.

Furthermore, deployment and implementation are not left to chance. Each campus receives the necessary resources to implement required systems including training modules, materials, and active support from central office. This alignment of district structures, initiatives, and support does not mean that all schools are treated alike. Though all campuses are expected to comply with district initiatives, when deploying district systems and support, resources are distributed based on need, and not every campus receives the same levels of support. District leaders can determine whether or not campuses have complied with required implementation through Campus Support Teams and other monitoring systems. Together with the culture of shared accountability, these coherent structures and systems impact change at the campus and classroom level.

#### *Changes in Campus and Classroom Practices*

The cog that the secondary process drivers turn is change in campus and classroom practices. Principal respondents confirm changes in their own practice as well as in the practices of their teachers. Principals and teachers engage in focused dialogue on learning and achievement, analyze data, observe classroom instruction, and provide specific feedback on instructional practice. Respondents reported Content Literacy Strategies have been deployed district-wide and are

present in classrooms throughout the district – at every school level. Principals also report an increase in the quality of collaboration on their campuses as a result of a district-deployed professional learning.

Though respondents expressed the belief that the drivers presented here have had a direct impact on reducing the achievement gap, there are far too many variables and factors involved in individual student achievement to be able to draw this conclusion. Based on the evidence of the data gathered in this study, a primary driver: sustained and effective district-level leadership; supported by two secondary drivers: nurtured a culture of shared accountability, and built district structures and systems to support learning and achievement have driven changes at the campus and classroom level that have in turn contributed to the progress in closing achievement gaps in Village ISD.

### *Conclusions*

In a grounded theory study, the researcher begins without a specific theory or construct in mind in order to follow wherever the data may lead her. While the elements present in districts that have closed achievement gaps have been identified, the processes utilized in districts to create these elements are less well-documented. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine how a school district made progress in closing achievement gaps with all students.

Given the nature of this study, the following propositions are advanced.  
Effective, district-level leadership; systems to select, develop, and evaluate

campus-level leaders; a culture of shared accountability; systems of accountability; and district structures to support learning and achievement may contribute to changes in campus and classroom practice. This conclusion is related to prior research regarding the efficacy of a collaborative supervision model to impact teaching and learning (Ovando, 2000). It can be further ascertained that district-level decisions based on research and inquiry have contributed to the progress noted in Village ISD. Finally, when district-level leaders intentionally manage change, deploy initiatives and systems district-wide, and embrace a commitment to professional learning, there is a potential for the district to make progress in closing achievement gaps with all students.

Further analysis to determine directionality of the relationships between the findings on Village ISD, affirmed that sustained, effective district-level leadership has been the primary driver of two secondary process drivers: nurtured a culture of shared accountability, and built district structures and systems to support learning and achievement. Together, these three drivers have led to changes in campus and classroom practices, which contributed to increases in student achievement and progress in closing achievement gaps.

It should be noted that though an attempt has been made to give an accurate portrayal of Village ISD, this report cannot fully capture the pervasive professionalism and enthusiasm present in the respondents. The pride expressed for district and individual school accomplishments combined with a playfulness

and joy in working together was clearly communicated to the researcher, but has been difficult to portray on the page.

### *Implications for Practice*

Educational policy at the federal level mandates that gaps that currently exist between the achievement of White students and students of color, as well as those present between students who qualify as economically disadvantaged with those who do not be eliminated by 2014 (U. S. Congress, 2001b). The percentage of Texas school districts that have made substantial progress to close these achievement gaps is relatively small. While each school district is unique, processes employed by Village ISD may apply to districts which face similar challenges. Leaders of other district's can utilize the findings from this study to become informed about the processes employed by a school district that has made progress in closing achievement gaps with all students.

On a cautionary note, it is possible for readers to skim through the findings from this study and decide that critical processes are already in place in their school districts. Districts that have not yet made substantial progress in closing achievement gaps may need to further examine their current culture and systems. A district may have similar systems in place, but lack a culture of shared accountability. Conversely, a district may have people dedicated to reaching all students but lack adequate district-level support or systems to truly impact learning and achievement at the campus and classroom level. Or, the district may

have the necessary culture and systems, but just requires more time for progress in closing achievement gaps to develop. Discovering if a district has effective, district-level leaders who have nurtured a culture of shared accountability and built district structures and systems to support learning and achievement will require deep reflection and self-study by the district, or outside researchers. Therefore, an additional implication for practice would be for other educational leaders to replicate the methods of this study to analyze the culture and systems currently in place in their own school districts.

#### *Implications for Further Study*

Although a single case study offers many limitations, it also presents a multitude of opportunities for other research. These include further study within Village ISD as well as research outside of the district.

Village ISD is a complex educational organization and the 18 respondents who lent their voices to this work are not representative of the district as a whole. Within Village ISD, further research could include interviews and/or surveys with teachers, students, families and other campus and district-level staff members which may confirm, or refute the findings included in this study. The data represented in this study is from a single point in time in the history of the district. Longitudinal research conducted in Village ISD might uncover other patterns when compared over the course of several years.

In locating a district that met the research criteria, three other Texas school districts were also identified. Repeating this research in one or more of these districts would allow for comparison of findings across settings. Or, as in the case of Collins' research (2001) Texas districts with matched demographics but lower achievement results could be researched to identify processes that distinguish a Recognized district from a district that has yet to achieve this rating under the current accountability system.

## Appendix A 2006 Texas Accountability System Requirements

**Table 6: Requirements for Each Rating Category**

	Academically Acceptable	Recognized	Exemplary
<b>Base Indicators</b>			
<b>TAKS (2005-06)</b> • All students <i>and each student group meeting minimum size:</i> • African American • Hispanic • White • Econ. Disadv.	meets each standard: • Reading/ELA ... 60% • Writing ..... 60% • Social Studies... 60% • Mathematics .... 40% • Science..... 35% OR meets Required Improvement	meets 70% standard for each subject OR meets 65% floor and Required Improvement	meets 90% standard for each subject
<b>SDAA II (2006)</b> All students (if meets minimum size criteria)	meets 50% standard (Met ARD Expectations) OR meets Required Improvement	meets 70% standard (Met ARD Expectations) OR meets 65% floor and Required Improvement	meets 90% standard (Met ARD Expectations)
<b>Completion Rate I (class of 2005)</b> • All students <i>and each student group meeting minimum size:</i> • African American • Hispanic • White • Econ. Disadv.	meets 75.0% standard OR meets Required Improvement	meets 85.0% standard OR meets 80.0% floor and Required Improvement	meets 95.0% standard
<b>Annual Dropout Rate (2004-05)</b> • All students <i>and each student group meeting minimum size:</i> • African American • Hispanic • White • Econ. Disadv.	meets 1.0% standard OR meets Required Improvement	meets 0.7% standard OR meets 0.9% floor and Required Improvement	meets 0.2% standard
<b>Additional Provisions</b>			
<b>Exceptions</b>	Applied if district/campus would be <i>Academically Unacceptable</i> due to not meeting the <i>Academically Acceptable</i> criteria on up to 3 test measures. (See detailed explanation.)	Exceptions cannot be used to move to a rating of <i>Recognized</i> .	Exceptions cannot be used to move to a rating of <i>Exemplary</i> .
<b>Check for Academically Unacceptable Campuses</b> (District only)	Does not apply to <i>Academically Acceptable</i> districts.	A district with a campus rated <i>Academically Unacceptable</i> cannot be rated <i>Recognized</i> .	A district with a campus rated <i>Academically Unacceptable</i> cannot be rated <i>Exemplary</i> .
<b>Underreported Students</b> (District only)	Does not apply to <i>Academically Acceptable</i> districts.	A district that underreports more than 100 students or more than 2.0% of its prior year students cannot be rated <i>Recognized</i> .	A district that underreports more than 100 students or more than 2.0% of its prior year students cannot be rated <i>Exemplary</i> .



## Appendix B Summary of Findings from Six Research Studies of District-Level Success

	<b>Equity-Driven Achievement-Focused School Districts Skrla, 2000</b>	<b>How Six School Districts Changed Into High Performance Systems Cawelti, 2001a</b>	<b>Collaborating to Establish Standards &amp; Accountability, Green, 2001</b>
<b># Districts</b>	4	6	11
<b>Purpose</b>	Discover what effective districts do to close achievement gaps	Extend research on district-level rather than classroom or school-level reform	Analyze district-level systemic change leading to improved learning standards & accountability measures
<b>Research Questions or Hypothesis</b>	How do effective districts organize and operate to educate all children to high levels of success?	What are the common experiences of districts that are meeting high standards?	How did systemic change occur in eleven school districts successfully establishing standards, assessment and accountability measures?
<b>District Selection Criteria</b>	Conducted equity audits on identified districts with at least 5000 students and 30% low SES campuses, and at least two secondary schools rated recognized	Districts serving significant numbers of low SES students with significant academic gains identified by the US D of Ed Regional Labs	Districts had evidence of at least two: standards, professional development, implementation of programs, and collaboration. Final selection by NEA
<b>Methodology</b>	Site visits conducted by teams of researchers included interviews, classroom observations, and document review.	Site visits with interviews; analysis of longitudinal data; and examination of district documents	Utilized grounded theory, site visits with recorded interviews with superintendents, principals, school board members; Verification visits were conducted in year 3.
<b>Strengths</b>	Districts studied met multiple criteria to ensure that efforts had resulted in closing achievement gaps.	Findings reported separately for each district highlighted individual rather than generalized processes	Districts selected for study had to meet process criteria; verification follow up conducted at some sites
<b>Limitations</b>	Districts studied did not maintain results after Texas raised standards and increased assessment rigor	Selection criteria for districts and study method was not consistent across all districts studied	Inconsistency in number of site visits and length of study per district; findings unconfirmed by achievement results
	<b>Equity-Driven Achievement-Focused School Districts Skrla, 2000</b>	<b>How Six School Districts Changed Into High Performance Systems Cawelti, 2001a</b>	<b>Collaborating to Establish Standards &amp; Accountability, Green, 2001</b>
<b>Finding 1</b>	State context of accountability for achievement and equity;	Superintendent & others nurtured shared beliefs about learning, high expectations & focus on results	Creative tension: dissatisfaction with the status quo
<b>Finding 2</b>	Local equity catalysts;	Decentralized management & budgeting which increased accountability by linking people to results	Focused, flexible, inclusive, leadership;
<b>Finding 3</b>	Ethical response of district leadership;	Aligned curriculum combined with item analysis and individual student analysis	Participation from stakeholders;
<b>Finding 4</b>	District transformation included processes, practices, programs, actions, structures; and proactive redundancy systems	Focus on processes to organize instruction, provide tutoring, & frequent practice of tested skills	Commitment and focus on core values which included student outcomes;
<b>Finding 5</b>	Everyday equity – involving changes in beliefs that led to changes in practice	Sustained multiple research-based changes over a period of years	Collaborative relationships between the district and unions;
<b>Finding 6</b>	N/A	Focused on teaching and re-teaching the test content based on individual student results	Targeted, strategic professional development.
<b>Outcomes</b>	District must be willing to let go of antiquated beliefs and practices and adopt an equity belief system in order to effect change	It is possible to achieve success with traditionally low performing student populations	Research provided insights about leadership processes; decision-making; standards; curriculum development; parent, teacher, and community involvement
<b>Recommendations for further research</b>	Why did these districts not sustain academic gains under higher standards required by the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) as measured by the TAKS	Assess the impact of district culture and capacity for change on actual systemic change efforts.	Student achievement results from studied districts disaggregated by student population groups could be examined to determine tangible impact of systemic changes

	<b>Beyond Islands of Excellence: Togneri, 2003a</b>	<b>The Council of Great City Schools Snipes, 2004</b>	<b>Best Policies in Urban Educational Reform, Kim, 2006</b>
<b># Districts</b>	5	3 Urban Districts and part of a 4 <sup>th</sup> District	22 Major urban districts
<b>Purpose</b>	Discover how districts had improved instructional delivery as evidenced by increased student achievement scores.	Determine ideas on how to improve effectiveness of urban schools by studying processes in place in effective urban districts	Identify best policies and practices of urban educational reform.
<b>Research Questions or Hypothesis</b>	How did the districts create the will to begin reform? What changes occurred in approach to professional development? What was the impact of stakeholder interaction? How was leadership distributed?	What is the context of successful districts? What was the source and nature of change? What strategies resulted in student achievement gains? How did policy, practice, and strategies interact?	Are there linkages related to causal factors between the identified process drivers and outcome drivers?
<b>Methodology</b>	At least 25% economically disadvantage and diverse ethnic makeup including LEP; at least three years of increasing student achievement data and reduction of achievement gaps	Retrospective case studies examined the districts with measured academic achievement success and compared their experiences with districts that had not yet achieved success	Collected quantitative and qualitative data from all 22 USI sites using the Key Indicator Data System (KIDS) instrument designed by Systemic Research, Inc. (p. 23). Analyzed interviews, focus groups, teacher surveys and school district documents
<b>Strengths</b>	Effectiveness confirmed through measured achievement success; consistent research; detailed analysis of findings	Compared case study information from districts that had, and had not demonstrated student achievement gains.	Study completed over the course of six years; high poverty districts elected to adopt a specific systemic reform model to improve math and science achievement results
<b>Limitations</b>	At least one district selected for study, (Aldine) did not maintain achievement gains over time	Success at the elementary level did not correspond to secondary success.	Each district had been required to follow a specific model which may have limited the areas focused on by researchers
<b>Finding 1</b>	Public acknowledgement of poor performance and the courage to create change;	Preconditions for Reform: school board focused on policy not daily operations; shared vision; ability to diagnose district's problems; ability to redesign district systems to support learning and schools; allocation of resources to support reform	Classroom Driver (Process): curriculum, instruction & assessment
<b>Finding 2</b>	District-level approaches to instructional improvement, curriculum development, and coaching;	Focused on student achievement at all levels of the organization; Unified the curriculum; relentlessly used data;	Policy Driver (Process): support for high-quality learning and teaching including professional development & student support
<b>Finding 3</b>	Widespread vision on high-performance for all students;	Created accountability systems utilized by all stakeholders;	Resource Driver (Process): convergence of educational resources
<b>Finding 4</b>	Using data to drive decisions and budget allocations;	Focused on the lowest performing schools;	Stakeholder Driver (Process): partnerships and leadership with broad-based support
<b>Finding 5</b>	Designing district-level professional development models and strategies deployed systematically at campus sites;	Professional development through ongoing job-embedded learning formats;	Attainment Driver (Outcome): achievement for all students
<b>Finding 6</b>	Redefining and re-distributing leadership roles and accountability for outcomes;	Provided central office support at the school site;	Equity Driver (Outcome) Improvement in achievement for those historically underserved
<b>Finding 7</b>	Making a long term commitment to reform.	Focused on P-K and elementary first; and created specific strategies for secondary students.	n/a
<b>Outcomes</b>	The context of the district as well as the context, content, delivery of professional development supports student achievement gains.	Districts that have prerequisite for change in place can impact student achievement through district-level reform	Researchers conclude that policy implementation rubrics are positively linked to student outcomes
<b>Recommendations for further research</b>	Conduct follow on study to determine why Texas districts included in the study did not maintain achievement gains when measured by TAKS assessments.	Discover why schools that share the same district context and strategies do not produce equitable gains in achievement such as elementary vs. secondary success	Apply the Key Indicator Data System to determine the presence or absence of the drivers identified in districts that have had academic success without formally adopting the USI model

## Appendix C Semi-Structured Interview Guidelines

Introduction: Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today. My doctoral research at The University of Texas at Austin focuses on how a Recognized Texas school district made progress in closing achievement gaps with all students. Your role in this school district affords a unique perspective and I appreciate your sharing your perceptions of the processes employed by your district to make progress in closing achievement gaps. This session will be tape-recorded and transcribed; however, your responses will be kept confidential and no personally identifiable information will be included in the final dissertation.

Have you had an opportunity to review and sign the consent form?     \_\_\_ yes \_\_\_ no

Do you agree to this interview being tape recorded?                 \_\_\_ yes \_\_\_ no

Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. Please describe your role/position in your school district and how long have you served in this capacity.
2. What other roles have you served in this district?
3. Based on the 2006 State of Texas Accountability System, your district received a Recognized Rating which is based in part on closing achievement gaps with all students. How do you think your district accomplished this?
4. Can you think of one particularly powerful example or vignette from your experience, or observation, that exemplifies the district's move from an Acceptable to a Recognized Accountability Rating? (Collins, 2001, p. 241)
5. Let's take one of the items you mentioned. What was the catalyst for introducing \_\_\_\_\_? (process/strategy)
6. Who were the key people, and their positions, involved in selecting this option and how did they each contribute to the decision-making process?
7. What other options were considered but not selected?
8. Why do you think these other options were not pursued?
9. How much time elapsed between the proposal of the idea and its selection by the district?
10. How did the district get commitment and alignment with its decisions? (Collins, 2001, p. 240)
11. Describe any planning that occurred including who was involved and in what capacity.
12. What did the district try during this period that didn't work? (Collins, 2001, p. 240)
13. What barriers had to be overcome and how were these barriers overcome?
14. What factors do you think have contributed to your district's successful establishment of this element (process/strategy)?
15. What else can you tell me about the process used by the district to deploy and sustain this element (process/strategy)?
16. Other school districts in Texas with similar demographics have yet to achieve a Recognized Rating. If you were to join one of these districts in your current role, what process would you recommend to help your new district achieve sustained improvement?
17. What should I have asked you that I didn't think to ask? (Patton, 2002, p. 379)
18. Who else would you suggest I interview about process deployment in the district?

## Appendix D Consent Form for Study

Title: : District-Level Success: A Case Study to Determine How a Recognized Texas School District Made Progress in Closing Achievement Gaps with All Students

IRB PROTOCOL #

Conducted By: Ann O'Doherty, Educational Administration, 512 414-4931

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Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Martha N. Ovando of The University of Texas at Austin

Department / Office: Educational Administration, Telephone: 512 475-8575

You are being asked to participate in a research study. This form provides you with information about the study. The person in charge of this research will also describe this study to you and answer all of your questions. Please read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to take part. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You can refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You can stop your participation at any time and your refusal will not impact current or future relationships with UT Austin or participating sites. To do so simply tell the researcher you wish to stop participation. The researcher will provide you with a copy of this consent for your records.

**The purpose of this study** is to determine how one school district made progress in closing achievement gaps with all students as measured by the State of Texas Accountability System. It is anticipated that between 15-20 respondents representing various roles in the school district will be interviewed.

**If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to do the following things:**

- Participate in an interview conducted by a single researcher

**Total estimated time to participate** in study is approximately 60 to 90 minutes

**Risks** of being in the study

- This study may involve risks that are currently unforeseeable.
- Though actions will be taken to prevent the loss of confidentiality (see confidentiality and privacy protections below) there is a risk that confidentiality could be lost.
- Any other risks associated with this study are no greater than everyday life.
- If you wish to discuss the information above or any other risks you may experience, you may ask questions now or call the Principal Investigator listed on the front page of this form.

**Benefits** of being in the study: Respondents may benefit from the reflective process of answering questions regarding how the district has made progress in closing achievement gaps with all students.

**Compensation:** There is no compensation associated with participating with this study.

**Confidentiality and Privacy Protections:**

- Respondent privacy will be maintained by conducting interviews only with those individuals who have given their consent and by arranging interviews at a time and

- location convenient to the respondent.
- Respondents will be able to ask questions about the research and will be able to end the interview or withdraw permission to be included in the research.
- Confidentiality of respondents will be maintained by removing personally identifiable information from transcripts. Each respondent will be assigned a code number and this number will be associated with any data that is derived from the interview. Quotes included in the final report will not specify the work assignment or role of a respondent unless there are multiple respondents with the same role.
- The data resulting from your participation may be made available to other researchers in the future for research purposes not detailed within this consent form. In these cases, the data will contain no identifying information that could associate you with it, or with your participation in any study.

The records of this study will be stored securely and kept confidential. Authorized persons from The University of Texas at Austin, members of the Institutional Review Board, and (study sponsors, if any) have the legal right to review your research records and will protect the confidentiality of those records to the extent permitted by law. All publications will exclude any information that will make it possible to identify you as a subject. Throughout the study, the researchers will notify you of new information that may become available and that might affect your decision to remain in the study.

#### **Contacts and Questions:**

If you have any questions about the study please ask now. If you have questions later, want additional information, or wish to withdraw your participation call the researchers conducting the study. Their names, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses are at the top of this page. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, complaints, concerns, or questions about the research please contact Jody Jensen, Ph.D., Chair, The University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at (512) 232-2685 or the Office of Research Support and Compliance at (512) 471-8871 or email: [orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu](mailto:orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu). You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

#### **Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information and have sufficient information to make a decision about participating in this study. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix E Meeting Observation Field Notes Template

Event:  
Observer: O'Doherty  
Participants:

Date/Time:  
Location:  
Other Attendees:

Description of Setting:

Agenda Item	Discussion

Highlights:

Key Points:

Research Question: RQ1: \_\_\_\_ RQ2: \_\_\_\_ RQ3: \_\_\_\_

## Appendix F List of District Documents Reviewed and Analyzed

- I. Accountability Data Tables for District and Individual Schools 2004, 2005, 2006, and 2007
- II. Academic Excellence Indicator System District Reports 1991-2006
- III. Academic Excellence Indicator System Selected District Data, 1994-2002 and 2003-2006
- IV. Adequate Yearly Progress District Data Table, 2005, 2006
- V. Annual Performance Report, 2003-2004 (district website)
- VI. Baker's Dozen: Strategies to Raise Student Test Scores
- VII. Balanced Scorecard Information Document
- VIII. Balanced Scorecard completed for Personnel Department
- IX. Board of Trustees Agenda, June 7, 2007
- X. Board of Trustees Information Brochure, 2006-2007
- XI. Cabinet Meeting Agenda, June 4, 2007
- XII. Cabinet Meeting Minutes, May 21, 2007
- XIII. Campus Support Team Agenda, Fall 2006
- XIV. Campus Support Team Process Directions, 2006-2007
- XV. Campus Support Team Outline, 2006-2007
- XVI. Content Literacy Strategies Handout
- XVII. Curriculum & Instruction Online Tools with Instructional Improvement Process
- XVIII. Estimated Weighted Average Daily Attendance (WADA) as of May 29, 2007
- XIX. General Fund Information as of June 4, 2007

- XX. Human Resources: Do's and Don'ts of Interviewing
- XXI. Human Resources: Job Fair Flyers
- XXII. Human Resources: Teacher Interview Questions for Recruiting
- XXIII. Human Resources: Teacher Interview Rating Form
- XXIV. Human Resources: Telephone Reference Checks
- XXV. NISL: Instructional Leadership Gap Analysis Guide
- XXVI. NISL Training Documents and Handouts, June 4 – 6, 2007
- XXVII. NTI Site Usage Overview – Summary of district and campus messaging data
- XXVIII. Marzano's 9: Researched-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement
- XXIX. Principal/Assistant Principal Evaluation
- XXX. Principles of Learning, Curriculum, and Teaching
- XXXI. SMART Goals Tree Diagram Template
- XXXII. Strategies for Subject Area Proficiency: Math, Science, Social Studies, & Literacy
- XXXIII. Strategic Plan, 2002-2007
- XXXIV. Student Profile, Grade 8, Science
- XXXV. Village ISD 2006-2007 Facts & Figures
- XXXVI. Village ISD, PreAP/Advanced Placement Data, August 2007
- XXXVII. Waggoner, Lori, History of the Village ISD, 1990
- XXXVIII. Website Information on District Demographics
- XXXIX. Website Information on Individual Schools
- XL. Website Information on Superintendent, Cabinet Members, and Directors
- XLI. Website Information on the Board of Trustees



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## Vita

Ann O'Doherty was born in Elmhurst, Illinois in 1959 and grew up in the care of her parents John Paul Doherty and Louise M. Michels. In 1977, she graduated from Proviso East High School in Maywood, Illinois. Four years later, she received a Bachelor of Science degree from Illinois State University in Special Education – Socially Emotionally Maladjusted & Learning Disabilities and re-located to Texas. After serving as a special education and general education teacher in Austin and Round Rock, Texas, she completed a Master of Education in Educational Administration at The University of Texas at Austin. Ann began her career as a campus administrator in Round Rock ISD and served as principal of Laurel Mountain Elementary, Stony Point Ninth Grade Center, and Ridgeview Middle School. In June 2005, she was accepted into the Cooperative Superintendency Doctoral Program at The University of Texas at Austin and later joined the staff at UT as the Deputy Director of the Central Texas Leadership Development Alliance grant of the Principalship Program.

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